OUTLAWS OF THE BAD LANDS

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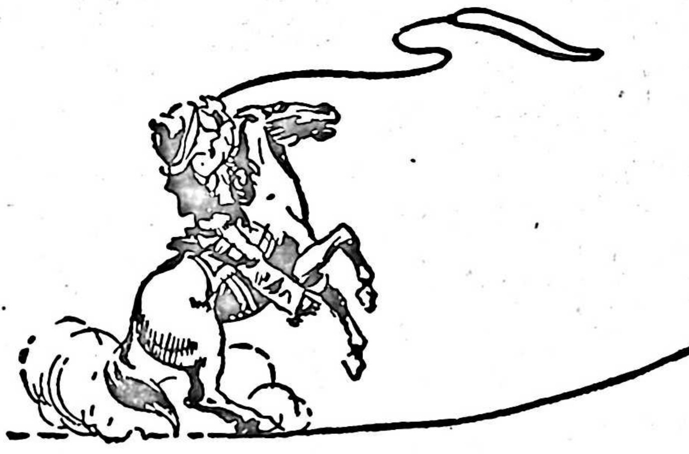
A Wild West Story



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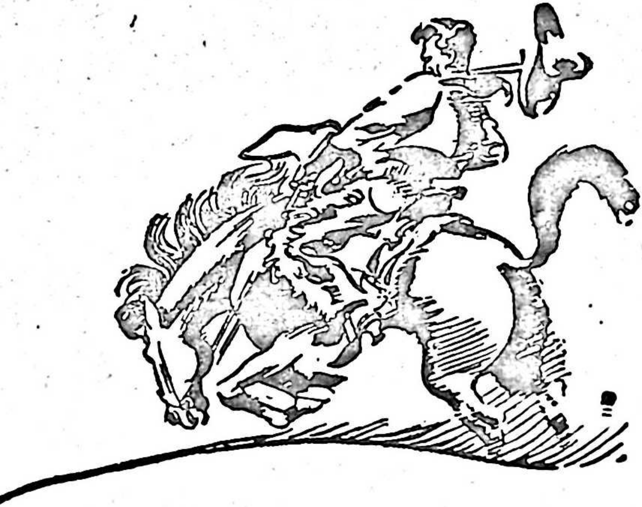
Adventure in the West

BIG BILL BURLSON might describe himself as a poor wandering cow waddy, but he certainly was a crack hand at taming wild mustangs. It was his performance on the back of a bucking broncho which first impressed Kate, daughter of the boss of the I Cross Bar. For a youngster of five and twenty he was a virtuoso in the saddle and an artist with a six-shooter. Cool courage, one would say, was his strong suit. When, therefore, a gang of outlaws from the bad lands shot up the little town of San Ignacio, striking terror into the hearts of the inhabitants, it was a disappointment that Bill took no hand in their pursuit. It was even alleged that Bill was in league with the bandits. But that question was not to be solved until a most exciting man hunt, culminating in a fierce dog-fight, had been brought to a successful conclusion.



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RANGER LEE



WILD WEST CLUB
WILLIAM COLLINS, SONS AND CO., LTD.
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CHAPTER I

As the man on the bay horse jogged along the road that led to the top of the rise he saw another road reaching northwards. At its terminus were some trees and what looked like ranch buildings with a background of lone mountain that stood like a wooded monument in the middle of the grassy plain. A mile or so out on this road was a fast-moving dust-cloud that looked as if it was made by more than one horse.

"Mighty fine range country," the man commented absently.

Reaching the crest of the rise, he was surprised to see a rider within fifty yards of where the roads joined, and that this rider was a woman in tan riding-skirt and jacket. He had time to observe little more than this when the roan horse she rode suddenly snapped down its head until it was between its forelegs.

"By gosh, he's going to buck!" muttered the man, and laughed a little.

After the first tentative pitch the roan began to buck violently while its rider leaned far back in the saddle and hauled on the reins.

Even as he smiled the man on top of the rise saw that something was wrong. He clamped the spurs against the sides of his fine bay and sent that animal racing down the slope. As he approached the bucking roan he caught a glimpse of its rider's set face and tightly compressed mouth.

"Stick him!" he shouted, and shouldered the bay against the pitching bronc, grabbed its bridle. With a pull of a long arm he jerked up the roan's head.

"Climb down," he ordered, "he'll be at it again."

The girl hesitated, and he saw brown eyes that looked as if their owner was not accustomed to taking orders unless she chose to take them.

"Get off," he commanded. "That saddle is loose."

"Oh!" she cried. "Loose again! He always was a sweller!"

The man found he could not hold the fractious mustang, so slid to the ground where he had better control of the animal

Now with left hand he held the bridle in an iron grip, while with right he caught the horn of the unsteady saddle. The girl slid to the ground. As if the roan had accomplished its purpose, it shook itself and stood quiet.

"That fool saddle!" exclaimed the girl. "I thought I had it cinched tight. He always pitches when a saddle gets loose on him."

The man looked at her, saw she was of medium height, and slender. He thought she was very pretty. She looked at him and noted he was all of six feet tall, with broad shoulders and lean waist, at the left side of which a holstered six-shooter hung.

"Thanks," she said a little breathlessly.

"You are more than welcome, ma'am," he answered. "Sure glad I happened along."

"I am, too," she said candidly. "Something might have happened if that saddle had turned. I'm Kate Ingalls." She turned for a moment towards the north, eyed him again. "My father owns the I Cross Bar yonder."

"I'm Burlson," he said with such simplicity that her immediate thought was that here was a name of more than ordinary importance.

Though her body trembled because of the brief jolting it had received, a slow smile quirked her lips and there was a twinkle in her brown eyes.

"No first name, Mr. Burlson?"

"Bill."

"Simple enough," she agreed seriously. "I'm glad to meet up with you, Mr. Bill Burlson."

"Which goes double. Are you on your way to Ignacio?"

"On my way to town."

He asked her whether the roan were a periodical and temperamental bucker. She smiled, but her smile quickly turned into a grimace.

"Yes! The son-of-a-gun is," she admitted. "You can't ever tell when he will make up his mind to pitch. He doesn't like a loose cinch."

He eyed the roan, a rather large mustang, looked more critically at the girl, decided she was about twenty years old.

"I believe," he drawled, "as how that bronc never had

a first-class peeling. Don't you reckon if he was peeled proper he'd be a first-class horse from now on?"

"He might," she agreed. "Do you——"

"I'd admire to fork him."

"Then go to it!" she encouraged, with bluntness that was characteristic of her. "I don't see any ropes on you, Mr. Burlson."

He glanced up the north road, saw that the dust-cloud was only a half-mile away, and that three riders were making it. He quickly changed saddles, passed the bridle reins of his bay horse to the girl.

"Best look out for that cinch," Kate Ingalls warned. "He's the worst sweller on the I Cross Bar ranch."

Burlson loosed the latigo, placed a knee against the roan's side, hauled hard on the cinch. The mustang groaned, bowed its back. Burlson jerked a loop into the latigo, grabbed the horn and shook it. His sun-browned face was flushed now and there was a smile of recklessness or disdain upon it.

The girl, watching, mused that Burlson, whoever he was, might not take life very seriously. Yet there was something likeable about him.

He turned, grinned broadly at her.

"Do I bite the dust?"

"Let's wait and see," she suggested. "If you are a professional bronc-peeler——"

He looked down the road that stretched towards San Ignacio, and tried to see the three riders through the dust.

The girl flushed and her eyes flashed a warning.

"If you're going to peel that bronc, then peel him!" she ordered. "What does it matter whether I'm hard to look at or not?"

She had already admitted to herself that Bill Burlson was not hard on the eyes, and his swift changes of expression had puzzled and amused her. Now the recklessness and disdain left his face and he looked mournfully sober, more so when he jerked his Stetson forward to cover most of his blond hair.

"Please don't be too hard on a poor, wandering cow waddy," he implored. "I'm just trying to do you a good turn, ma'am."

"For goodness' sake, don't call me ma'am! I never did like to be called that. I'm not an old married woman."

He appraised her now, drolly, speculatively and with what seemed much surprise.

"You ain't married, Miss Kate?"

"No, of course not."

He continued to appraise her until she flushed angrily.

"Well, now, ain't that just too bad?" he drawled. "Well, I reckon it ain't permanent. No, sir, I reckon as how you won't have to wait long, Katie."

The colour rushed from her round face and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"If you are going to peel that mustang, go ahead and peel him!" she ordered. "If you're not, then change those saddles back the way they were and I'll ride him without all this fool talk. How do you know I won't have to wait long to get married?"

Apparently taken aback, he grinned at her nevertheless.

"Oh, I've got a way of prognosticating such things. You needn't ask me how I savvy'em, because I don't just know. Reckon it's a sort of gift."

"Like your ability as a bronc-peeler, I suppose," she suggested.

"Why, yeah, you might say it was like that. Now you just hold my bronc while I take the vinegar out of yours."

Then he was in the saddle and his quirt was swinging wide, its lash popping under the roan's belly while with spurs he raked the animal from shoulders to flanks.

Kate Ingails drew back, taking the bay horse with her. She had expected average riding, but now this man who called himself Burlson shook out the reins as if they were of no use in this wild effort to dislodge him.

The roan pitched and rocked. It bunched its hooves, coming down on a space no larger than a dinner-plate. It crow-hopped and sun-fished. It pawed with its hind feet at the boots in the stirrups. It squealed, pin-wheeled, squealed again. It was in its wildest paroxysms of bucking when the three riders arrived with wild yells, much dust and the popping of six-shooters. Bullets kicked up puffs of dust about the erratic and frantic hooves of the roan mustang.

The men with the popping guns were big fellows, brown of face, beard-stubbled and moustached. Each had two six-

shooters, and when one set was emptied and rammed into holsters they dragged filled guns which they proceeded to empty, amid hilarious yells.

"Ride 'em, cowboy!"

"Stick him, you long-legged maverick!"

"Rowel him fore and aft, paisano!"

Almost as explosively as they had arrived, the three hard-looking riders departed. True, their pistols were emptied, but they went shouting and calling back ribald advice and commendation and leaving behind them a suffocating cloud of dust.

In this dust-cloud Burlson hauled up the head of the roan, spurred the mustang into a wild run. He negotiated a circle perhaps two hundred yards in diameter, and brought the now blowing and apparently docile horse to a stop near the girl.

He started to smile and wave a hand, but became sober and speculative when he saw that her face was white and tense and her eyes either fearful or indignant. He followed her look with his own, and saw that down the road the three riders on the backs of as many horses were bobbing above the dust.

"Some punchers from your father's ranch, Miss Ingalls?"

"I should say not!" she answered angrily. "Do you think the I Cross Bar would keep such hellions as those on its pay-roll?"

He looked again at the riders bobbing above the dust-cloud, the fast hooves of their horses raised, then back at her.

"Then who are they?" he wanted to know.

Kate Ingalls looked once more at the departing horsemen, and bit at her lower lip.

"I don't know," she said doubtfully but with indignation. "I never saw them before, but I suppose they must be a part of the outlaw gang that hangs out yonder in the badlands."

Burlson looked in the direction her arm pointed, and saw that far to north mesas and broken terrain hung faint and mysterious in the shimmering air.

"Those are the badlands, Mr. Burlson."

"Why, yeah," he drawled, and flung one knee about the horn of the saddle the blowing roan had tried so

frantically to dislodge. "They don't look any too good. You say there's a bunch of outlaws there?"

The girl nodded vehemently, and her eyes flashed again.

"A bad bunch, too!" she declared. "But if those three are a sample, you ought to be able to see for yourself that they aren't any gang of Sunday School kids."

He looked down the road that stretched towards San Ignacio, and tried to see the three riders through the dust.

"Well, I was sort of busy and didn't have much time to size 'em up," he remarked, "but I did get the idea from the noises they were makin' that they were a little tough."

"A little? Mr. Burlson, they're as tough as rawhide! You can just take my word for it, they're mal hombres if they're a part of that badlands outfit. The ranchers around here have had no end of trouble with them."

CHAPTER II

KATE INGALLS' first impression of Burlson had not been especially flattering to him. She had thought him a reckless cowboy, probably out in search of a job, since she had never seen him before in this range country. After she had seen the skilled and accomplished manner in which he had handled the fractious roan she began to regard him differently.

That he was experienced in his work was certain. She had already seen that he was handsome and young. She thought he was about twenty-five. However, she clung to the belief that he did not take life very seriously, for he had seemed not to care at all whether he might be bucked off to land on his head and perhaps suffer a broken neck.

"Well, there you are," he told her as he tossed away the match that had lit his cigarette. "You'll likely have a horse that won't do much more pitching now if you keep the cinch tight."

"I'll keep it tight," she promised. "I'll do that if I have to cinch him with a block and tackle."

Presently she was frowning in sudden deep thought. Where had she heard the name of Burlson before? He had announced it as if it were more than an ordinary name.

"Just the same, I don't believe I ever did hear it," she told herself.

He read her perplexity as doubt of whether she should ride the roan, and suggested that he ride the bronc to town.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of him," she smiled.

"That's not the idea. My saddle is already on him. Yours is on my bay, and he doesn't mind a woman riding him. Let me take a little more of the wire-edge off this cayuse for you, Miss Ingalls."

When Kate mounted his tall bay she felt high in the air. Burlson stepped again to the saddle on the roan, and the mustang was now so docile it acted as if it had been ridden to old age.

"I reckon he's tamed right enough," he remarked as they started westwards. "Now tell me something about that outlaw gang up there."

Kate looked at him with a quizzical smile that quirked the ends of her mouth.

"Are you thinking of cleaning up on that outlaw outfit, Mr. Burlson? Sheriff Jeff Slade has tried it."

"And failed?"

"Well, the outlaws still roam the badlands."

"How many?"

She told him the actual number of desperadoes was not known. There might be only half a dozen, and on the other hand there might be a score.

"Is this sheriff of yours a quitter?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps he isn't all that a sheriff could be, though."

"Lacks sand, eh?"

"Why—I don't know that that's it," Kate said with a little frown. "Anyway, he doesn't seem to get very far when it comes to rounding up those outlaws. You see, the badlands are in the very northern part of this county.

Burlson considered as the horses jogged along the dusty road.

"Likely he figures if he keeps things peaceable round this part of the county that's all he was elected to do, eh?"

"Maybe that's about it. Tell me, Mr. Burlson, can you round up outlaws like you can break broncs?"

There was neither levity nor recklessness in his look now.

"What makes you ask that?"

"Well, you seem to be a first-rate hand at bronc-peeling, Mr. Burlson."

"I might make a first-rate hand at rounding up outlaws, too, if I got started."

He left with her the vague impression that he could clean the desperadoes from the badlands, provided he determined to do it. Her curiosity was aroused now, for there had been considerable talk of bringing in a man to tackle the outlaws who stole cattle and horses from all the ranches that bordered the wild and almost inaccessible region between the grasslands and the rugged Martaña Mountains.

"Burlson!" she said sharply.

He turned to look at her, saw that she was very serious.

"Are you a range detective?"

"Me? A range detective?" He flung up both his hands. "May the Lord deliver me if I am!"

Kate did not tell him she still trembled inwardly with fright at what her fate might have been had her saddle turned and her foot been in the stirrup. Nor did she speak of the gratitude she felt for his opportune appearance. The manner in which he had tamed the mustang left her with much admiration for his courage and skill. She had seen many riders on bucking horses, but not one who had done a better job than Burlson had done with the roan.

"Where are you going?" she inquired with the thought that he would be a good man at the I Cross Bar.

"Oh, just rambling round. You see, Miss Kate, I figure that if I keep ramblin' round, some day I may run on to a pretty girl who likes me. I always dote on pretty girls with brown eyes and black hair, sort of soft, crinkly hair."

She flushed with half-pleasure, and could not refrain from touching a lock of soft dark hair that showed from under the brim of her Stetson.

"You have plenty of nerve, Mr. Burlson."

"Nerve," he agreed, "is my long suit. I might say I'm grass-bellied with it."

He looked at her so soberly that she had to wonder if this were a boast. She tried to think it was, and did not like him as well as she had the moment before.

"As I was saying," he went on, "I like 'em with brown eyes and crinkly black hair."

"And," she said somewhat irrelevantly, as bright spots

stained her cheeks, "my father owns the I Cross Bar ranch, and it's some outfit, too."

Burlson's sun-browned face lengthened dolefully.

"And me, I'm just a poor, wandering cowboy looking for any old outfit where I can make the boss think I earn forty a month!"

Kate wanted to offer him a job on the I Cross Bar. But no, that was her father's privilege to hire his riders, or let it be done by Hank Ross, the range-boss.

About the time Kate decided definitely that she would not seem interested in Bill Burlson at all, Jeff Slade stepped from his office in San Ignacio and saw three strangers coming down the street. The sheriff was a fat man, short and florid. Now his red face sobered until his reddish moustache pricked out at its twisted ends.

The riders at whom he looked were big, dusty men, beard-stubbled and moustached. Their chaps flapped. Each wore a brace of holstered six-shooters, and on their hard faces were looks meant to tell the world they cared little what any other men thought of them.

"I wonder," Sheriff Slade mused half aloud, "where the hell they come from?"

He would have felt much less comfortable had he known they were Buck Jackling, Andy Arkett and Jack Tobin, actually members of the lawless band that inhabited the bad-lands far to northwards, and that they were paying the little frontier town their, first visit and meant to enjoy themselves while they were here. Perhaps they would make the visit profitable, too.

"Say, looky!" sneered Tobin as the three came abreast of the small adobe before which the sheriff stood. "If it don't say that's the sheriff's office, boys!"

"Well, damn me if it don't!" chuckled Jackling, the biggest of the trio, who was black-visaged and sinister. "You fellers reckon that's him there now?"

"Sure looks like one of 'em," grinned the shorter, blonder Arkett. "Say! Howdy there, Sheriff!"

Slade partially lifted a hand, and turned redder. He told himself he did not like the look of this trio.

They paid him no more attention, but rode on, heading for the nearest saloon, which was the Casa. Slade watched

with narrowed, wrinkled eyes as the three breasted their horses to the hitching-rack in front of the Casa and swung down. He saw them mechanically adjust the belts that supported their holstered guns, saw them swagger across the worn board-walk. Jackling arrogantly shoved in the swinging doors. The three disappeared.

The short main street of San Ignacio was irregularly lined with adobe and frame buildings. The town was never lively except when bands of cowboys were in from the ranches after round-up or for beef shipments. Now it drowsed in the hot noonday sun, and Frank Davidson, who owned the Casa, was the only man in the place when the three new-comers surged in and bellied up to the bar. Davidson's lean face brightened, for any new customer was a welcome sight to him.

"Hey! Where the hell's your rottenest red-eye?" Jackling roared as he slapped the bar with a big hand.

"Howdy, boys," said the saloon-man as his smile brightened. "I'll fix you right up."

"You'd better!" Arkett bellowed. "We want liquor, and we want it pronto!"

"Damned pronto," added Tobin as he pounded the bar with the handle of a gun.

"Say there!" Davidson cried as his face paled with anger. "You're marking that mahogany up!"

"Is that so?" asked Tobin with much innocence as he put three more dents in the bar. "I didn't have no idea this here wood was so precious."

"Well, it is!" retorted Davidson. "That piece of mahogany cost me an even hundred dollars."

The forty-five shifted in Tobin's big hand. Its muzzle pointed at the saloon-man's breast.

"We want liquor!" Tobin snarled. "And we want it before I have to put a hole in you big enough for a coyote to crawl through!"

"Best set out the bottle, hombre," ordered Jackling. "What the hell do we care whether this here board cost you a hundred dollars or a thousand?"

Davidson, professional gambler as well as saloon-keeper, had run too many saloons along the frontier not to recognize the deadliness of these men. Helpless but angry, he slid a bottle and three glasses along the bar, and looked on with attempted impassivity while the customers slopped whisky over

the brims of their glasses. He was comparatively composed by the time the glasses had been emptied down the three dusty throats. Jackling snapped a twenty-dollar piece on the bar, spun it towards the saloon-man.

"Keep the change!" he ordered with a curse. "Likely it will pay for the dents in your precious board."

"Thanks," accepted Davidson as he dropped the twenty into the till. "Now have one on the house."

"Bet your damned life we will!" roared Tobin as he holstered the heavy revolver he had held in his left hand while he had manipulated the whisky glass with his right.

They drank at the saloon-keeper's expense. Then Arkett slapped hard money on the bar. Then, as if not to be outdone, Tobin spun a ten-dollar piece towards Davidson.

"Damn it! Leave that bottle there. We want to fill 'em up again!"

With each succeeding drink their profanity grew louder and more obscene, and their disdain and recklessness grew. After Jackling had downed his fourth glassful he backed off a step. His black eyes roved around, brightened.

"Say, looky!" he grinned as he pointed a dirty left forefinger.

From the middle of the ceiling dangled a large kerosene lamp garishly ornamented with vari-coloured prisms and pendants. A moment after Jackling called attention to this unusual and ornamental lighting fixture, three six-shooters were riddling it with bullets while the interior of the saloon rocked with the violence of the explosions until it seemed to threaten to lose its roof.

Kerosene trickled down, ran in a stream. Glass tinkled to the floor. Some of the pendants, shattered to bright bits, spun away, reflecting coloured light as they went.

"Wowee!" chortled Jackling. "This here's our day to howl!"

"This here's our day!" roared Tobin as he whirled and faced the bar.

Shooting with wild abandon, but accurately nevertheless, the three began to break bottles and glasses, while with each shot they uttered wild and defiant yells. With much profanity they shouted ridicule at Davidson, who had dropped to the floor back of the bar as the first pistol had pointed in his direction.

Up the street some fifty yards Sheriff Jeff Slade stood undecided for a few moments as the bedlam smote his ears. Then he hitched his gun-belt to a better position about his rotund middle, bristled his reddish moustache, and started towards the Casa Saloon.

"That sort of business don't go in this here town while I'm here," he told himself, and quickened his waddling gait. "Them hombres may think they're curly wolves, but I've got a different idea about it."

CHAPTER III

THOUGH not a man of great courage, Sheriff Slade was by no means a coward. Now he grabbed this opportunity as a chance to restore the prestige he had lost by his failure to maintain law and order in San Ignacio County as he had been sworn to maintain it.

He was passing the livery stable when he encountered Sam Tibbitts, owner of the place. Tibbitts was tugging at his long whiskers and looking speculatively in the direction of the Casa.

"Wal, Jeff, what's the ruckus yonder?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," growled Slade as he hurried on.

Tibbitts wagged his hoary head.

"Now mebbe he'd better, and mebbe he hadn't."

As the sheriff neared the saloon he heard only an occasional shot and yell. He did not stop to think that two of the desperadoes were reloading hot guns. Knowing that all the eyes of the men in the main street—and the noise had brought forth half the population of the town—were upon him, Slade marched into the saloon, disdaining to keep a hand on the butt of his six-shooter.

The swinging doors were still swinging when three yells rose wildly.

"Damned if it ain't our amigo, the sheriff!" Jackling roared."

"And don't he look like he'd been on poor grass, too?" yipped Tobin.

"Sure is a heap underfed," Arkett chortled as he flashed

a pistol in the direction of Slade's red face. "Best disarm him, hadn't we, boys?"

Arkett and Jackling and Tobin agreed drolly that the sheriff should be relieved of his weapon because he might accidentally shoot himself with it.

"I represent the law here!" Slade told them. "Don't you touch this pistol of mine!"

Jackling and Tobin drew their weapons now. The former said:

"Take it, Tob."

Shaking with combined fear and indignation. Slade had the presence of mind to keep his hand away from his pistol.

"And now," sad Jackling, "you sure got to take a drink with us, Sheriff."

Slade replied that he did not want a drink.

"Which is a sure-enough lie," drawled the grim Arkett. "I never seen a fat sheriff in my life as wasn't always honin' for a drink."

His scowling face red enough to burst, Slade was prodded to the bar. He was forced to drink a tumblerful of raw whisky.

"I'll have the law on you three for this!" he growled. "You are under arrest right now!"

The outlaws looked at one another and guffawed.

"Just listen to him talk!"

"Must be clean out of his head."

"Liquor sometimes affects fat men that away," commented Tobin as he moved back. "Say, just take a look at how he's built, boys. Take a good look."

Jackling and Arkett now seemed to take notice of the portly build of the sheriff for the first time.

"Sure got a rump like a prize cow-critter," remarked the former.

"And a belly that ain't nohow slim," added Tobin. "He sure would make a fine fandango-dancer, now wouldn't he? Say, fellers, you know what I'd suggest?"

Slade had not liked the looks of these three as he had seen them ride into town, but he was not yet certain they were anything more than three hilarious cowboys new to the region. His anger and humiliation, however, were enough to make the blood-vessels swell dangerously upon his red neck.

Davidson, again officiating back of the bar, was not of the sheriff's political party, so made no move to lessen his discomfiture.

"What would you suggest, pardner?" Arkett demanded as he sidled towards Tobin. "What you think we orter do to that fat piece of side-meat?"

The desperadoes left Slade in doubt for only a minute or so. They had decided to "chap" him.

"By hell, you won't!" the sheriff spluttered. "You won't do no such thing to me! I represent the law here! You three are under arrest!"

"The law," remarked Jackling with suddenly ominous calm, "sure needs dustin' off a heap."

Slade had braced his back against the bar. He turned towards Davidson now.

"Frank, are you goin' to stand there and let this happen in your place?"

The saloon-keeper smiled wryly and shrugged.

"It ain't my funeral, Jeff."

Slade, who was powerful but soft, was grabbed by men who were as powerful and hard. Tobin kicked off his bat-wing chaps, got a chair.

Struggling futilely, the sheriff was laid bottom-side-up across the chair. His head was held by Arkett, his feet by the powerful Jackling, who was in reality the leader of the badlands outlaws. Tobin was swinging his chaps to bring them down upon the sheriff when Jackling yelled:

"Hey, there! This here ain't the place to do this! There ain't no audience!"

"That's right," Tobin agreed. "There's only the barkeep here."

Slade was picked up bodily by two outlaws while Tobin dragged the chair and the chaps through the front doorway. He deposited the chair on the board-walk and Slade was laid across it

"Wallop him a-plenty!" Jackling ordered as he held the sheriff's feet. "I got the idea them official pants sure need a good dustin' off."

Arkett had an equally firm grip on Slade's head, and while half the population of San Ignacio watched, Tobin wielded the chaps. It was not a painful beating because the chaps, though heavy, were broad and comparatively pliable.

Yet the pain that shot through the sheriff's brain in the form of humiliation and futile indignation was intense as each cracking blow fell.

He struggled at first, but before a dozen blows had fallen he managed to lie still, though in his angry brain whirled hot thoughts of revenge. Along the street some men laughed, but others compressed their lips and muttered that no matter what sort of sheriff Jeff Slade was he should not be forced to suffer the indignity of a public chapping.

There was no scarcity of courageous men in San Ignacio, and had some of these suspected that the three strangers were anything but hilarious cowboys the three would not have ridden away. As it was a large majority of townsmen were content to see Slade treated in a manner which might eventually lead to his resignation. He was not a man who was popular with the citizens, for since his election to office he had developed a pompous arrogance and had proven anything but an efficient peace officer.

Tobin was still swinging the chaps with gleeful gusto when Kate Ingalls and Burlson galloped down the main street, swung their horses towards the big store at its southerly side. Kate had seen all sorts of cowboy pranks and practical jokes, and her eyes twinkled with appreciation as they saw what was occurring on the walk in front of the Casa Saloon.

"Why, who on earth is getting chapped?" she laughed.

"Nobody but the sheriff," returned Henderson, who owned the store. "I'm telling you, Kate, it's a sorry spectacle."

"The sheriff?" gasped the girl, all her mirth gone. "Why, it is Jeff Slade!"

Burlson, who had been enjoying the spectacle, sobered now. He turned to the score or so of men who stood on the store porch. Then he looked at the ashen-faced girl who was staring hard at the men who were ignominiously drubbing the sheriff.

"Those are the three hombres we saw at the forks of the road?" Burlson asked.

"Yes—they are!" she answered emphatically. She would have added that the three were outlaws from the bad-lands had she been certain of this. What they were doing now, however, was more in keeping with the actions of hilarious

and reckless cowboys. She saw that Burlson was on the ground.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Just going to put a stop to that," he answered coolly. "It'd be all right if they were chapping a saloon-keeper or even a storekeeper or somebody like that, but when it comes to a sheriff——"

"It won't do Jeff Slade any harm," a man laughed.

"Just the same it brings disrespect for the law," contradicted Henderson.

"That's my way of looking at it," agreed Burlson. His clean-shaven face was now grim.

"But if those men are——" Kate began, and checked her words.

"That's all right," Burlson reassured as he waved a confident hand.

The girl dismounted and stood beside his bay horse while she watched him saunter towards the Casa, where Tobin appeared to be tiring of his sport.

"I'm glad I ran across him," Kate told herself. "If he stops that then I'll know he has plenty of the right kind of nerve."

The nearest of the onlookers had kept well away from the chapping. Now as the desperadoes saw a tall young man who looked like a cowboy approaching they forgot they had been drubbing the sheriff of San Ignacio.

"You comin' to get some of the same?" Jackling swore as he released Slade's feet.

"If you are, just git across that chair!" added Arkett as he let go of the sheriff's head.

Tobin was indeed winded because of the violent work and the whisky he had drunk. He stepped back, panting. Though he breathed hard, his blue eyes measured the newcomer, who had stopped at the edge of the saloon walk.

"That'll be plenty of that," reminded Burlson.

Arkett and Jackling were instantly alert, belligerent. Their hands sneaked towards pistols.

"Well now! Are you a-tellin' us that, paisano?" purred Jackling.

"I'm telling you!" reiterated Burlson as he crooked a hand near the butt of his six-shooter.

Then three weapons that seemed to have jumped

miraculously from as many holsters were in the hands of the outlaws and trained upon Burlson, who discreetly took the crook out of his fingers.

The moment he had felt himself free, Slade had scrambled to his feet. His red face was splotched with purple. He grabbed at the heavy chair to use as weapon, but a kick from Jackling's boot sent it spinning.

"Shall we chap this hombre?" purred Jackling. "He sure seems to be honin' for it, Tob."

Tobin had buckled the belt of the chaps about his waist, and stood ready to snap the leg-straps.

"Done enough chappin'," he drawled with a grin. "I'm plumb winded. I need a little pistol practice now."

While Slade angrily backed against the front wall of the saloon, the outlaws looked at one another, grinned.

"Damned good idea!" approved Jackling. He took a quick step, jerked the revolver from Burlson's holster. "Step up to the dancin' platform, mister!"

Burlson smiled as he stepped to the walk.

"Be a little careful of my new boots, boys," he requested coolly.

"Aw, we won't damage your new boots provided you're good at dancin'," Arkett sneered.

The crack of six-shooters rocked the silence of the dusty street. Arkett emptied his pistols first, then Jackling took up the firing, then Tobin. Bullets punctured the boards within scant inches of Burlson's flying boots, ripped up splinters.

And while the pistols roared and Burlson danced coolly yet frantically to keep out of the way of the bullets, smoke half-enshrouded the little group on the walk in front of the Casa Saloon. From several spots along the street men yelled their approval.

However there was not even mute glee on Kate Ingalls's face. She was paler than usual, and her lips curled in bitter contempt and disappointment. The man who had tamed her horse, the man she had thought a hero because he had bravely started to the rescue of the humiliated sheriff was now doing jigs, hoe-downs, buck-and-wings while the bullets of the desperadoes made little holes in the board-walk and sent up dust and showers of splinters within scant inches of his nimble boots.

Before Kate could begin to still the chaotic emotions that churned in her brain, the shooting had ceased and the three outlaws were surging towards their snorting, milling horses. She saw Burlson standing coolly upon the walk as the three men climbed to their saddles.

To her amazement they reined towards the store instead of racing out of town. They slid their horses to stop amid showers of dust and gravel.

"Get inside there! All of you!" Jackling yelled. "We don't want to have to do any killin' this time."

As men from other parts of the street stared, dazed or incredulous, the little crowd of men and women on Henderson's porch was herded into the store by Jackling and Arkett, while Tobin, pistol in hand, sat his saddle and kept watch. There was such precision about the movements of the three, and such a lack of any talk, that it was apparent this was not the first time they had entered a frontier town to shoot terror into its inhabitants.

Within three minutes the two outlaws emerged from the store, Arkett lugging a heavy sack of ammunition while Jackling's pockets jingled with all the money Henderson had had in his tills and safe.

Amid yells and salvos of shots the three jabbed their horses with cruel spurs and raced eastwards in a gathering cloud of dust.

"Who are they?" a man panted as the crowd rushed from the store. "Who the hell are them fellers?"

"Who are they?" Kate Ingalls cried. "Why they are a part of the outlaw outfit that lives in the badlands! That's who they are!"

CHAPTER IV

THOUGH Kate Ingalls's statement was merely surmise, it spread as fast as men could spread it. As for the girl, she stood pale and tense as she looked down the street towards where a few men had grouped in front of the saloon. She could see Burlson because of his height. Men were laughing at him, and he seemed to be joining in their good humour.

Then Sheriff Slade burst out of the crowd in front of the

Casa and headed towards the larger crowd before Henderson's store.

"Howdy, Jeff!" Tibbitts hailed soberly from his stable. "That was sure a fust-rate spankin' you done got."

"Go to hell!" Slade roared. His face was now as red as raw beefsteak. "Why didn't some of you men come to my aid?"

"Wal," returned the old liveryman, "mebbe we orter ask why you didn't go to the aid of that there young feller as was dancin' so fine. You're the sheriff."

Again Tibbitts was told where he could go, provided he wanted something hotter than San Ignacio.

Men smiled at the belligerent sheriff as he neared the store. Even Kate could not keep an entirely serious face.

"Got your britches dusted plenty, didn't you, Jeff?" a cowboy drawled.

"Sure did get a wallopin'," added a townsman.

Despite her disappointment in Burlson, Kate could not help smiling as Jeff Slade became more and more belligerent as he was forced to listen to remarks about the chapping he had received.

"This here ain't any laughin' matter with me!" he roared. "What's this talk I hear. You're sayin' them three hellions is what?"

A sort of silence came, and more than one inquiring glance was cast in Kate's direction.

"I said I thought those three belong to the badlands gang," she said. "Of course I'm not sure, Sheriff, but I think they do."

As he tried to make the crowd believe he felt no anger or humiliation because of the treatment he had received, Slade questioned Kate. She told him where she had first seen the three alleged desperadoes, and how they had acted.

"That's it, by gosh, that's it!" the sheriff declared as his jaw thrust out. "And I had them hellions right in my grasp, and didn't know it!"

"Yeah," an old trapper agreed, "onct I had a mountain-lion by the tail, but I sure did know it, Slade."

"Don't try to be funny, Mexico!" the sheriff snarled. He surged towards the store entrance, calling to Henderson to follow. Slade said he wanted two forty-four calibre Colts and five boxes of cartridges.

"What you goin' to do with so much ammunition, Jeff?" inquired a cowboy who had followed the sheriff into the store. "You figurin' on makin' that stranger up the street dance a little more?"

Slade puffed out his cheeks and glared at the cowboy, but made no reply in words.

"I'm goin' after mean men," he informed Henderson presently. "I'll be damned if I'll let any three ornery outlaws ride into this town and raise hell!"

"You goin' alone?" persisted the cowboy.

Slade whirled upon him, cheeks still puffed with rage. "I'm not goin' alone!" he roared. "I'm goin' to take a small posse of picked men with me, Ben! It's time the badlands outfit was definitely cleaned out."

"It sure is," agreed the cowboy sarcastically. "If you ask me, it was time it should've been done a long time ago. But I ain't goin'. Me, I ain't lost no badlands outlaws, Sheriff."

"Wait till you're invited to go!" advised Slade as he grabbed the new revolvers and ammunition.

Kate Ingalls barely heard the sheriff as he came from the store bawling that he wanted five or six hard-riding, hard-shooting men for his posse.

"What I want's men who will hang on till the last dog's dead!" he added, with all his officious arrogance restored.

Kate was looking at Burlson, who was coming up the street, the centre of a small group of men who had lingered in front of the Casa. There was nothing in Burlson's sun-browned, handsome face to give indication that he felt chagrin or anger. As he stopped and regarded the girl his smile was not broad, but seemed genuine. Kate stood stiff and uncompromising.

"Well?" she said when he failed to speak.

"Yeah," he drawled, "did you like the show?"

He seemed oblivious of the contempt and scorn that smouldered in her eyes and curled her lips.

"It certainly was a show!" she cried. "And you were the biggest fool of all the actors!"

Burlson made no reply, but continued to smile at her as if he considered her some rare and desirable specimen. In her anger and disappointment she jumped from the porch to the ground and began to remove her saddle from his horse.

"Pardon me," he requested as he deliberately forced her aside.

She took two short, angry steps.

"You needn't ask my pardon!" she said witheringly. "You are certainly one fine, brave man, you are!"

Holding the loosened saddle, he smiled at her.

"I decided I wanted to dance," he said simply. "I just dote on dancing anyway. Like my dancing, Katie?"

"Don't you Katie me! I'm not Katie to you, you—you four-flusher!"

"You will be some day," he announced coolly. "That's all settled."

She clenched her hands at her sides to keep from trying to strike him with them. He had told her he was going to take the three outlaws, and all he had done was to make a spectacle of himself by dancing frantically, yet as if he enjoyed it, while their bullets had made little holes and ripped up splinters about his flying feet.

Slade now had five men who said they would go with him as deputies.

"Then come on!" he ordered. "We've got to overhaul those three men before they get into the badlands or we won't have any chance of getting them."

Burlson took his attention from the indignant girl long enough to look at the six as they started across the street, the sheriff in the lead.

"Hey!" ejaculated Slade as he noticed his fellow in humiliation. "I'm goin' after them three with a posse, stranger! Want to go along? You ought to have the right sort of grievance against them!"

"I reckon not," drawled Burlson. "I haven't lost any three men, Sheriff."

"Suit yourself then!" Slade growled, and hurried on with his men, bound for the livery stable after horses.

"You wouldn't want to go!" Kate Ingalls said icily.

"Not just now," agreed Burlson as he held the saddle. "It isn't just the proper time, Katie."

Again the girl's hands clenched until the nails cut her palms, but because of the men about her she could not cry out and tell him not to call her Katie. She tried to do this, however, with fire-flashing eyes and curling lips.

"I like you better when you ain't so mad, Katie," he told her softly.

"I don't like you whether you are mad or not!" she retorted, remembering again that she had thought him a hero there at the forks of the road because he had saved her from injury, possibly death.

"You'll get over it," he prophesied as he dropped the saddle to the ground. Then, as if he had forgotten she was there, he removed his own saddle from her horse, cinched it on the big bay.

Unable to stand and look on, she grabbed up her own saddle and was lifting it to the back of the snorting mustang then Burlson drawled:

"Pardon me, Katie, I'm changing these saddles."

"Well, change them then, for all I care!" she flared as she let him take the saddle. She refused to move away, however, as he cinched the saddle on the roan, doing a thorough job of it by kneeing the mustang until it blew air from its lungs.

"Like my dancing, Katie?" Burlson whispered as he looked at her from the end of an eye.

"I'm not interested in your dancing," she retorted with chin high.

"You will be."

Kate refused to retort, and tried to look through him.

"Just wait till you see me dance with a girl, Katie." He jerked the loop into the latigo.

"You can dance with a squaw for all I care!" she hissed. "Let me have that horse!"

"Beg pardon! I was holding your horse, wasn't I?"

She grabbed the reins he held out, flung them over the head of the roan mustang. Forgetting that she had come into town to visit a friend, she vaulted into her saddle and hit her horse hard with the spurs and headed eastwards towards her father's ranch.

"Sorter riled, ain't she, stranger?" drawled the cowboy called Ben.

"Why, yeah," Burlson agreed. "She does act that way, doesn't she?"

"High and mighty 'cause her old man's grass-bellied with money," volunteered Ben.

"So that's it, is it?" Burlson said dolefully. "And

I forgot to ask her to get me a job at the I Cross Bar. Ain't that just rotten luck?"

"Not so rotten as you think, pardner. If you was poundin' leather there she'd made it so durned hot for you you'd wish you was dancin' to the tune of them three outlaws."

Burlson lifted his eyebrows as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"Say, did you like my dancing, amigo?"

"Fine!" chuckled the cowboy. "Best dancin' I ever saw. Music was a little noisy, though."

"So it was," Burlson grinned. "But I never did mind noisy music."

"Me neither," agreed Ben. "The more racket the music makes the better I dance. Say, what about us amblin' over to the Long Chance and gettin' us a drink?"

Burlson pondered, lengthening his countenance as if he always gave important suggestions weighty consideration. Then he drawled

"There don't seem to be any strong argument against it."

"Huh! All the arguments I know are for it, mister!"

They were nearing the Long Chance Saloon when six heavily armed riders emerged from the livery stable and turned eastwards, with the belief that if the three outlaws had come to town by way of the I Cross Bar ranch, they had fled in the same direction.

Had Sheriff Slade been less intent on establishing himself as a valiant officer he would not have led his thundering posse after Kate Ingalls, who was riding hard for home, with tumultuous thoughts in her dark head. The sheriff would have ridden more slowly and looked for tracts.

He would have had little trouble in finding the tracks of three horses turning north from the road a mile from town where some low, grassy hills afforded protection from long view.

Even as Slade and his posse thundered past the southerly end of these hills, Jackling, Tobin and Arkett were rounding their northerly end and preparing to head again for San Ignacio. This time, however, they did not intend to chap a sheriff, or to make a tall, good-looking young man dance to the music of roaring six-shooters.

CHAPTER V

BURLSON and Ben James drank in the Long Chance. The cowboy shoved his hat to the back of his head.

"Aw, come on and have another one, pardner," he begged.

"One's like a wife," drawled Burlson. "It's a-plenty."

"Huh! You got a wife?"

Burlson smiled and shook his head. Ben came closer.

"Then for cripes' sake, don't marry Kate, amigo! I ride for the I Cross Bar outfit."

"What's the matter with Katie?"

Ben puckered his face and grimaced in hard thought.

"She's durned spitfire, amigo, that's what's the matter. Besides, she's all swelled up in the head because old Pat Ingalls has got so much dinero and so many cows. Say, there ain't no gun in that holster!"

Burlson looked down, wagged his head.

"So there isn't. That reminds me, too."

Without explanation, Burlson headed for the doors. Ben yelled for him to come back and take another drink, but when he did not the cowboy ambled after him, overtaking him in the street.

"Where the hell you goin'?"

"There's no gun in this holster."

"Yeah," Ben accepted, half enlightened, "but I figured maybe you was lookin' for another chance to dance."

Burlson turned his head, and though his smile was boyishly disarming, there was something cold and enigmatic in his blue eyes.

"The next time," he said, "I may furnish the music for the dance."

"You mean that?" Ben stared, owl-eyed. "What you mean?"

Perhaps a score of men remained in front of the store. Some of them grinned at the tall stranger who wore the empty holster. Tibbitts had crossed from his stable after he had seen the posse depart.

"Young feller," he offered, "you're a fust-rate hand with them feet of yourn."

"I sure like to trip the light fantastic," said Burlson,

and went into the store with Ben James at his heels. He told Henderson he wanted two forty-four Colts.

"Just got two left," said the merchant.

"Hell, he don't need but one," corrected Ben. "He ain't got but one holster."

"And a holster," said Burlson without looking at the cowboy.

While the storekeeper watched with curiosity and some doubt, Burlson examined the weapons carefully, testing them for balance and twirling them on forefingers. James demanded:

"Say, you ain't a gun-slinger, are you?"

"No. Give me three boxes of forty-four shells, Mr. Henderson."

After loading the pistols and fitting the new holster to the worn belt, Burlson filled the empty loops of the latter, raked the cartridge boxes into a pile.

"By gosh," Ben laughed, "maybe you do mean to furnish the music for the next dance, amigo."

"I'd like," said Burlson, apparently ignoring the attentive cowboy, "to take a look at a rifle, a forty-four with a twenty-eight-inch barrel if you have one."

Henderson said such a rifle was long for a saddle gun.

"Show me one anyway."

"Aw, this hombre knows what he wants to buy." declared James. "You can't make up his mind for him like you do for some of us waddies, Henderson."

The storekeeper took from a rack a .73 model Winchester with an octagonal barrel, and handed it across the counter. Burlson grasped the weapon by the barrel and at the grip, turned it slowly over and over.

He looked along the sights, and was about to test the lever action when from outside came a bedlam of shots and yells. The men who had remained on the porch surged in, shouting, tense-faced, each trying to be the first inside.

"What the hell?" cried Ben, momentarily sober.

"Them three hellions again!" shouted Tibbitt. "They done come back! They're——"

There were more shots, more yells, the pound of hooves. The men who surged through the doorway were so intent on trying to gain places of safety that they failed to note the transformation in the young stranger who had been forced to

dance to the tune of popping six-shooters. They hazily saw him as he made for the wide doorway, a new Colt forty-four in each hand.

By this time the three outlaws, returning unsuspected and entering the main street at its westerly end, had driven every human being to cover with shots and profane yells.

Now, with the big, dark-visaged Jackling in the lead, they headed for the little bank, which was diagonally across the street from Henderson's store. They slid their horses to stops with showers of flying dust and gravel, and Jackling and Arkett jumped to the ground, passed their bridle reins to Tobin.

"Hold the horses and keep the damned street clear!" snarled Jackling as he made for the doorway of the bank with Arkett at his heels.

Tobin, who rode a horse trained to stand amid gunfire, was sweeping the deserted street with fierce, challenging eyes when he saw a man stride coolly from the store. That man had a six-shooter in each hand.

"Why, if it ain't that——as done the dancin' !" the outlaw sneered, and fired.

The bullet whipped past Burlson's right ear and punctured the board-wall of the store. Then to Tobin's surprise the man with the two guns jumped from the porch and and opened fire.

As Tobin sent his third shot towards the man near the store he flinched with pain from a bullet that had creased his left shoulder. He had emptied his pistol at the tall young man who was standing just off the store porch and shooting with well-timed precision when Jackling and Arkett rushed from the bank. The latter was carrying an empty sack.

"What the hell?" Jackling roared.

"That —— yonder!" snarled Tobin as he tried to draw a close bead on the man across the street.

As the other outlaws grabbed the bridle reins of their horses and began to shoot, they tried to aim carefully at the man across the street, but the snorting and pulling of their horses made accurate aim impposible.

Across the street Burlson was shooting slowly, as if he either disdained death or bore a charmed life. He was not the same man the village had regarded a few minutes before as a newly arrived joke. He had spent but seven cartridges,

"Hey! Let me get at 'em with that rifle!" a voice sounded a little back of him. He turned his head enough to see out of the end of an eye that Ben James was dropping to one knee with the new Winchester in his hands.

Burlson dimly heard the faint clank and click of metal. He shot at Jackling and Arkett, who were turned in their saddles and returning his fire as they spurred for the opening between the bank and the livery barn. Tobin, seeing that flight was the one sensible course, had already gained the narrow alley.

Burlson sent his last two bullets after Arkett before the last outlaw rider disappeared. A few men, made valiant by the hasty retreat of the would-be bank robbers, rushed from the store now, carrying their own weapons or guns they had grabbed up. One man fired both barrels of Henderson's big shotgun at the vanishing tail of Arkett's horse and yelled that he had blasted the rider to hell with a double charge of buckshot.

"'Taint so!" shouted the quaking and meticulous storekeeper. "That weapon was loaded with birdshot."

After listening to the diminishing pound of hooves, Burlson turned and saw James squinting inanely at the rifle while he bobbed his red head.

"Say! The durned thing didn't have no shells in 'er," James muttered as if still unconvinced. "I was sure doin' some fine shootin' though."

"In which case," said Burlson, "you didn't hit anybody."

James lifted his head to stare owlishly at the tall man who was holding an empty six-shooter in each hand, and seemed perturbed not at all.

"Yuh mean I didn't hit any of 'em?" the cowboy mourned. "And I was tryin' my durndest, too!"

"Well, that was good enough, amigo," approved Burlson as he rammed a pistol into a holster and began to reload the other.

The timorous now came from the store, and with the more intrepid one who had used the shotgun began to tell Burlson what a hero he was whether he had killed any of the outlaws or not. At least he had driven them off before they had been able to take any money from the bank.

"Rotten shooting, gentlemen," Burlson replied. "Damned rotten." He looked sad for the first time since he had arrived in San Ignacio. "Reckon I'll have to blame it on these pistols. I'm not broke in to them yet."

"You sure nicked one of them fellers!" declared Tibbitts.

"I believe maybe I did," Burlson drawled, "but I'm afraid it wasn't bad enough."

Ignoring the men who now wanted to acclaim him a hero, he loaded his other gun, then went into the store where he asked how much he owed for the revolvers, rifle and cartridges.

"By gosh," declared Henderson, momentarily warmed to generosity, "you can have the entire outfit for just ten cents, pardner!"

Burlson smiled in apparent surprise, then his face became a little bleak as he looked at the merchant.

"I want to know," he drawled, "how much my bill is at the regular price."

Men who had crowded back into the store began to advise him to accept the gifts. Hadn't he routed the outlaws? Wasn't he entitled to free weapons and ammunition? As Burlson turned there was something in his bronzed face that silenced the givers of advice.

"Beg pardon, gentlemen," he said. "I'm settling this bill. Thank you, but you see the only good advice I ever had was from my old pappy."

"Well, us men would sure like to know more about you!" Tibbitts declared. "Who the hell was your old pappy?"

"My old pappy," Burlson answered, and turned back to the storekeeper, who was now beginning to be grateful that his generous offer had not been accepted. "What's the bill at regular prices, Mr. Henderson?"

The merchant replied that it was fifty dollars even. Burlson jingled money in a jeans pocket, laid two double-eagles and an eagle on the counter.

"You'll have to let me make you a little present though," insisted the storekeeper. "You'll need a saddle scabbard for that Winchester, stranger."

"So I will," Burlson agreed as he took the weapon from Ben James, who still seemed puzzled that he had not

been able to do any effective shooting with the new gun. "I'll take the scabbard, Mr. Henderson, and thanks."

Burlson had poked the sixteenth cartridge past the spring-clip of the Winchester when a short man entered the store. He was wearing a soiled white shirt, black vest, black string tie and flapping black trousers. He swung his arms wildly and there was a frantic yet almost entreatingly grateful look in his small black eyes. The skin above his close-cropped blackish beard was as white as clean snow. He was Hepsteen, owner of the little bank, who supplied money to the ranchers when they needed it and were willing to pay the interest charges he levied.

"Hey, mister!" Hepsteen cried as he tried to steady his voice and keep his gaze fixed on the man with the long-barrelled Winchester. "How much do I owe you for keeping my bank from being robbed, mister?"

"Wal! Some more liberality," Tibbitts chuckled. It sure beats all hell what a lot of shootin' will do to a town."

With the barrel of the rifle now lying in the crook of his left arm, Burlson was regarding the banker as if he had to take complete measure of him, mentally and physically.

"Fifteen cents," he announced decisively.

"Fifteen cents?" echoed the startled Hepsteen. "Man, this is not a joke with me!"

Men set up a clamour for more money. Hepsteen, they insisted, was as well able to pay fifteen hundred dollars as fifteen cents. Burlson lifted his right hand and the bleakness returned to his face.

"I believe," he reminded, "that this man and I are conducting this deal. It'll be fifteen cents or nothing, sir."

"Fifteen cents or nothing?" Hepsteen echoed. His mouth fell open and remained that way until it looked like a tooth-studded reddish opening against the black of his beard.

"Fifteen cents!" Burlson snapped. "I never haggle."

While men protested seriously and factiously, Hepsteen paid over a dime and a nickel.

"Want a receipt?" drawled Burlson.

Hepsteen, who had been willing to pay a hundred and fifty dollars as supreme expression of his gratitude in the event that a sum this large were asked, stared wildly, incredulously. A smirking smile closed his mouth.

"Tut, tut," he clicked. "Do not mention a receipt, my good friend! This is a business transaction between gentlemen."

"Between gents," agreed Burlson, but his whimsical smile was erased by the clamour of men that he organize a posse and take up the trail of the three outlaws from the badlands.

Again he lifted a hand and what the men saw on his face caused them to become silent.

"I haven't lost any three bandits, gentlemen," he said calmly. "I just wanted a little practice with these new pistols." He turned and searched the crowd until he located the partially inebriated and still grinning James almost at his elbow.

"What you say, Ben?"

"Huh? Huh? What do you mean, amigo?"

"That we amble across the street and take that second drink we were talking about a while ago," enlightened Burlson.

"Sure! Sure! Me, I was just thinkin' about the same thing!

CHAPTER VI

THOUGH she did not know why she wanted to reach the home ranch in such haste, Kate Ingalls rode so fast that she was at the fork of the road before the sheriff and posse overtook her. As the six heavily armed riders trotted up she turned and faced them.

"Well, what do you want to overhaul me for, Jeff?"

"Ove haul you?" repeated Slade. "We're lookin' for them three mal hombres from the badlands. Seen 'em?"

"Oh! I thought maybe you wanted another chapping, Sheriff."

While his deputies grinned and some even openly guffawed, Slade's face became red enough to burst.

"This here ain't funny to me, Kate!"

"Oh, it was ve:y funny to me," the girl said mercilessly, for she was still suffering from disappointment in Burlson. "Sheriff, there must have been a lot of dust in the seat of your pants."

"More than there is brains in your fool head!" he snarled. "I want to know whether you've seen them three outlaws! Did they pass you, Kate?"

"Then didn't pass me."

"Then where did you see 'em last?"

"Soon after they left town. And don't you talk to me like I was your hired man, Jeff Slade!"

"Then you haven't seen 'em out here on the plain?" the sheriff asked, ignoring her rebuke.

"In the name of goodness!" she cried. "Haven't you eyes of your own?"

Slade squirmed in his saddle to sweep the rolling grass-lands with angry eyes, but failed to note anything even remotely resembling three fleeing riders.

"Sure does look to me like we might be off the trail," Chuck Cummings said.

"Told you we orter kept a look-out all the way for fresh hoss-tracks," added Dave Hailey. "Them hombres could've doubled back on us there by the Lonely Hills, Jeff."

With his usual stubbornness, Slade said he had watched the road for the marks of horses that might have left it. He insisted that it was his firm belief the desperadoes had fled on the road leading past the headquarters of the I Cross Bar ranch.

"I won't be satisfied till I've seen for myself."

"Then see for yourself," advised Kate as she touched her horse with spurs.

Filling his big saddle, Slade rode on, trying to look as if he had forgotten what had happened in town. The two older deputies, Overton and Villard, kept close back of the sheriff, but the other three chose the rather unsociable companionship of the girl who more than ever wished to be alone.

"Say, Kate," said Dick Fenton, "who was that hombre you rode into town with to-day?"

"He said his name was Burlson," she replied icily and without turning her head.

"Nice feller," put in Dave Hailey.

Kate kept her eyes on the dusty road and remained silent.

"That stranger," Cummings remarked soberly, "he sure can dance proper."

"Yep," added Hailey, "in all my years I never seen a man as was handier with his feet."

"He sure was mighty sprightly," grinned Cummings. "Never met up with a faster jigger."

"Or one as kept better time," Fenton said. "Say, that hombre never onct got out of step."

Unable to listen to more of this, Kate turned in her saddle, and her eyes blazed.

"That man you are talking about is an ornery coward!" she cried. "He went down to the Casa to stop those three outlaws from chapping the sheriff! That's what he went for, and look what he did!"

"Naw?"

"Yuh don't say?"

"I do say!" Kate corrected. "He told me so himself! And when he got there he got cold feet!"

The deputies looked soberly at one another.

"No sand in his boots," suggested Cummings.

"Sand in his boots?" exploded Hailey. "There sure wasn't, or he couldn't have flung 'em around as fast as he done!"

"Nope, I never seen finer dancin' in all my life, and I come from a place where they knew how to dance proper, too," declared Fenton. "I'll tell a Injun there wasn't any sand in that feller's boots. He never missed a single step to the tune of them pistol shots. You notice that, Kate?"

"Oh, I saw it all!" cried the indignant girl. "But you needn't think I care whether he had sand in his boots or in his head!" She grabbed the sides of her horse with the rowels, dashed past the other deputies and Slade, reined down to a trot.

"Well, I'll be gosh-durned!" muttered Hailey. "There sure ain't no understandin' females!"

"Huh!" grunted Fenton with a grin. "Who wants to understad 'em?"

Kate rode on, chin up and eyes ahead, while behind her the posse took her dust. She was puzzled about Burlson, and angered with herself because she had allowed interest in him to gain such a foothold in her thoughts.

"He may be all right as a bronc-peeler," she murmured, "but when it comes to taming outlaws he's a first-class counter-jumper."

However she was no surer of herself than she was of Burlson. She tried to keep from admitting to herself that she had found something more than likeable about him.

"If he hadn't called me Katie the way he did!" she flared silently. "He acted as if he were making fun of me! The—the coward!"

While disturbing thoughts milled inside her head like a bunch of wild cattle in a corral, her brain was not without its bewilderment over what had become of the three outlaws. They had certainly headed westward from San Ignacio, and she had been where she could see miles of the plain.

It was this puzzlement plus a desire to outdo Sheriff Slade that kept her silent. The headquarters of the I Cross Bar was not three miles away when she tensed, crouched a little in the saddle. Her eyes narrowed to slits to keep out the rays of the westering sun.

Off there a few miles, on the Pine Mountain trail, was a dust-cloud. It was moving fast. Kate reined crosswise of the road, stopped Slade and the deputies.

"There are your outlaws!" she cried.

"Where? Where?" demanded the sheriff.

"Over there!" Kate cried, pointing. "On the Pine Mountain trail. Can't you see them?"

"Durned if them ain't three riders all right," muttered Overton.

It took Slade but a minute to realize that somehow he had been outwitted.

"They must have got in back of the Lonely Hills somehow, damn it!"

Overton and Villard suggested that the three distant riders they saw might be cowboys heading for one of the outposts of the I Cross Bar.

"No, sir!" vetoed the sheriff positively. "There's three of 'em and they ought to be headin' that way!"

The sheriff had some reason on his side, plus an intimate knowledge of the region. The trail on which the three horsemen were led past the southerly end of Pine Mountain and on towards the entrance to the badlands.

"Come on, men!" he ordered. "We've got to ride. We have to head that outfit before they get to that timber yonder!"

He reined from the road, hit his horse with the spur rowels. As the deputies followed, Cummings turned and grinned at Kate, who was thankful for their going. "Say, Kate!" he yelled. "We orter fetched that feller Burlson with us!"

"Fetched him!" Slade shouted as he twisted his fat body in the saddle. "I asked him to come and he wouldn't do it!"

"And that," declared Cummings loudly as parting shot, "likely shows that he's one of the badlands outfit hisself! Eh, Kate?"

The girl now found she had food for more disturbing thought as she watched the posse widen the distance between itself and the road as it headed across the plain.

"I wonder whether he really is one of the outlaws! Maybe that's why he acted so funny when they made him dance."

Kate frowned as she kept the roan at a walk. She tried to recall each word and look Burlson had given her and the men.

"I just don't know," she told herself. "It was here at the forks of the road where I first saw him. He could have been coming from there as well as from the other way. And now that I think of it those three outlaws did act sort of friendly towards him there in town. At least they didn't chap him like they did the sheriff—or shoot him."

Slade ordered his men to keep their horses at a fast trot. "Want to keep 'em for the last run," he elaborated. "We've got to beat them hellions to the scrub timber or run 'em down out here on the plain."

From a rise Kate Ingalls watched the pursuit. The two parties were heading for the tip of a triangle where the mountains splayed out to join the grass and range country. Where the trail led through it, it was a region of shallow ravines and ridges littered with rocks and dotted with scrub cedars and pinons.

As Kate watched, the sun seemed to rest for a full minute on the summit of a westerly mountain. Then it was gone and opalescent lights, then opalescent shadows came to the plain. It was no longer possible for the anxious girl to see either pursued or pusuers, though occasionally she caught

glimpses of dust-clouds as they were whipped away by the rising evening wind.

The outlaws were within two miles of the broken region when Jackling yelled profanely and pointed to eastward.

"Look yonder! That's some——posse after us! We got to ride, boys, and ride hard!"

"We sure got to get to them ravines first," Tobin mused as he hit his horse with sharp spurs.

"An't there about six of 'em?" Arkett demanded as he put his horse to a run. "If they get in ahead of us they'll run us down here in the open."

"By hell, they won't get the chance to do that!" Jackling swore as he thundered ahead on the dusty trail.

Slade, watching vigilantly and hopefully, saw the three riders break into a run, and his hopes sank. The three men had seen the pursuers, and their increased speed was proof enough that they were the outlaws he wanted. Yet he was not too anxious to overtake them. He had five courageous men with him, and he could not let any of them suspect that the sheriff of San Ignacio feared any badlands outlaw. Then he remembered what these three outlaws had done to him in front of the Casa Saloon, and an almost insane rage anl desire for vengeance burned in his brain.

'.Use your spurs and use 'em hard!" he shouted to his deputies. "If we can't head that outfit before they reach the timber we'll have to follow 'em clean to the badlands!"

Coming twilight did not keep Kate Ingalls from seeing the dust that suddenly began to roll up from the Pine Mountain trail. She was not puzzled by the absence of dust above the posse, for she knew it was riding across grassland.

"They've seen the officers!" he cried aloud. "And there's going to be a fight! I wish Burlson was with them!"

Then she was wondering whether she wished Burlson were with the posse or with the fleeing outlaws. In this new and bewildering chaos of thoughts she decided that the one sensible thing for her to do was to ride hard for the I Cross Bar and send a force of cowboys to the aid of the posse.

CHAPTER VII

THE outlaws were well mounted. Coupled with this was the fact that they had the shorter distance to travel. They reached the edge of the broken country perhaps five hundred yards ahead of the posse.

A few random bullets kicked up dust well away from the three horses as Jackling, Tobin and Arkett swooped into the first ravine. They trotted round its rocky head, gained another ridge, this one rugged and dotted with brush. They spurred down into the ravine.

"We'll leave the horses here!" barked Jackling. "We'll give that posse a bellyful of lead!"

With carbines in hands they clambered back to the ridge, and gained it as Slade and his possemen, riding hard, appeared on the edge of the plain. The outlaws dropped to cover as Jackling said:

"Give 'em hell, boys!"

The posse, coming at full tilt, was met by a hail of lead that would probably have been a hundred per cent sanguinary had it not been for the twilight and the distance of more than two hundred yards that separated the targets and the hidden outlaws.

Old Overton flung up his arms, clawed at the horn, slid from his saddle. Villard jerked his horse to a stop as a bullet pierced his left arm near the shoulder. The next moment fat Sheriff Slade uttered a growl of pain as a slug cut his shirt and signed his right side.

Slade yelled to his men to scatter and get out of range, and whirled his horse and raced for the open plain while bullets kicked up dust all about.

Villard, who had been an Indian fighter, refused to flee. He rode to where Overton lay sprawled on the grass, looked down, slid painfully from the saddle as a bullet broke the neck of his horse. As the animal fell Villard grabbed his friend and dragged him away.

"Damn them hellions!" he swore. "They played an Injun trick on us!"

Slade and the three younger deputies were now out of range. At the sheriff's order they grouped, forming a blur in the dusk. Two hundred yards away, in the direction of the first ravine, Villard knelt beside Overton.

" Hurt bad, old-timer?"

When there was no reply, not even a moan, Villard shook his head.

" Plumb daid," he muttered, and folded Overton's hands across the front of his dirty flannel shirt.

Then standing beside his dead horse, Villard grimly emptied his Henry rifle at the ridge where the flashes of guns had shone dimly. Though the old Indian fighter's heroism and disdain of dangers were great, his expenditure of cartridges was futile. The outlaws had seen that their first salvo had put the posse to flight and Jackling had given the order to return to their horses and ride. Now even as Villard's bullets hit the rocks of the ridge or whistled over it, the three desperadoes were travelling fast towards where tall mesas loomed against the first northerly stars.

Hailey, Cummings and Fenton had not fled because of cowardice, but because of reaction to the unexpected attack. Now as they grouped about Slade they swore they were not yet through with the fight.

" We'll smoke them——out!" swore Fenton. " Night's just what we want."

Slade, though loath to quit entirely, counselled caution, pointing out to his men that the outlaws had the advantage of ambush and that Overton was mortally hurt, to say the least.

" Well, somebody's still alive yonder," Hailey growled as he heard the roar and saw the flashes from Villard's Henry.

Disdaining the sheriff's orders, the three deputies raced away towards the blur of timber and rocks at the right, their purpose being to flank the outlaws from that quarter.

Within a few minutes they were dismounted and firing at what they believed the approximate location of the outlaws.

Unwilling to return to San Ignacio as anything else than a hero, Slade rode fast towards where he had ordered the retreat. There he saw a man lying on the ground near a dead horse, saw Villard angrily thumbing cartridges into the magazine of his rifle.

" Get any of 'em?" the sheriff demanded. " Where are the——?"

" Git hell!" the old Indian fighter snarled. " They got Overton, and him the damnedest best friend I ever had, too! What'd you and them three yonkers run for? Why didn't you charge 'em?"

Sliding from his saddle, for he reasoned he would feel steadier on the ground, and make a smaller target, Slade explained that his first thought had been of getting his men out of danger. Then he had ordered the three younger deputies to ride in and attack from the right and slightly above where the outlaws had been in ambush. The sudden cracking of gunfire from the direction he indicated partially removed Villard's ire.

"Wal, that mebbe shows you got a little sense, Slade," he grunted. "Them varmints is on that ridge yonder, waitin' for us to come in and 'tack 'em."

"Then by the eternal, we'll give 'em what they're expectin'!" said Slade as he stepped to a position behind the dead horse. Kneeling there, he began to shoot fast at the ridge. Again disdaining danger, and with the hope of avenging the death of his friend hot in his grisled head, Villard stood up and deliberately used the old rifle which he contended was better than the latest Winchester model.

No answering shot came from the ridge, though from three separate places well to the right rifles cracked steadily. The sheriff's rifle was empty now. He refilled its long, tubular magazine with trembling fingers while he vividly remembered the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the three desperadoes in San Ignacio, with about half the population of the town looking on.

"Durned queer," Villard grunted as he ceased firing and peered into the thickening dusk. "Mighty durned queer. We couldn't have kilt 'em all. No, siree!"

"They're layin' low and waitin' for us to charge 'em," declared the sheriff.

"Mebbe, but I don't believe it, Jeff."

"Best be careful and wait a little longer," advised the sheriff, trying to force a cartridge into a magazine already filled.

Villard, however, was in no mood to take advice. He struck out boldly towards the edge of the first ravine as he noticed that the deputies well to right were beginning to move westwards as they kept up their desultory firing.

Slade, not to be outdone, followed the Indian fighter, found him crouched where he could peer across the rocky ridge to another one, fifty yards away.

"Open up, you damned ornery varmints!" Villard yelled. "I'm hyar to answer shot for shot!"

Not so much as a taunting yell came from the other ridge.

"Them durned varmints is gone!" swore the old deputy. "They snuk out like a passel of Injuns."

"The hell they have!" Slade ejaculated, trying to make disappointment cover the relief in his words. "Say, I'm goin' across there to see. Damn the rotten luck!"

The sheriff was about to bluster into the ravine when Villard ordered him to wait.

"You durned fool, don't you hear them men a-shootin' from yonder? They're shootin' at that ridge too."

With a shiver the sheriff realized that if he had gained the ridge on which the outlaws had been hiding he would have made himself a possible target for the rifles of the deputies hidden behind rocks and trees at the right. He bawled for Hailey, Fenton and Cummings to cease firing.

It was the old Indian fighter who first reached the second ridge. The three deputies came noisily down the ridge as Slade puffed up the rocky slope. The twilight was not yet thick enough to hide the empty brass shells lying in three different places. Slade cursed the coming darkness that had helped the outlaws to resume their flight.

It was Villard, too, who actually discovered that Tobin, Arkett and Jackling had fled. From the rocky trail in the ravine where they had left their horses Villard called for the other men to come. He lit matches and showed them the tracks of the horses, showed them boot-tracks, too.

Leading the way with catlike silence, and occasionally using matches, Villard proved his contention by pointing out marks made by fast-ridden horses in the trail that led northwards.

"Of all the cursed luck!" growled Jeff Slade. "There ain't one chance in a million of gettin' them three out of the badlands, boys."

Hailey, Fenton and Cummings were genuinely disappointed, for they had wanted a fight, though with them there had been no thought of making themselves heroes.

"Wal," Villard remarked dryly, "mebbe it's a good thing we didn't ketch up with 'em, Jeff."

"Huh? Why," snorted the sheriff. "Why is it good we didn't catch up with 'em?"

"Wal," the old posseman said with the same dryness, "they might have chapped the whole kerboodle of us if we'd ketched up with 'em, Jeff."

Rage clapped in Slade's ears as he actually heard again the smacks of the heavy chaps on his portly rear end. He gripped a six-shooter, and deadly hate smouldered in his eyes as they held on the grisled old fighter who at this time of peril and danger would make light of the humiliation an officer of the law had been forced to suffer.

"There's to be no more reference to that chappin'!" Slade warned, but loosed the grip on the handle of the Colt. "You men all know they were three to one on me, and I was powerless to prevent what happened."

"Wal, yeah," Villard agreed without apology. "Mebbe that's right."

The younger deputies, as disappointed as Villard because the outlaws had fled instead of remaining to fight it out, moved up the trail. They were average cowboys, however, and able to see jokes on themselves.

"Well," drawled Cummings, "our sheriff is sure smartin' plenty where he was spanked."

"The way he acts he sure must've been plumb blistered," added Hailey, who was half Irish."

"Fellers," announced Fenton solemnly, "some day I'm going to get me the experience of bein' chapped."

"Hell, we'll do it for you any old time, Dick," offered Chuck Cummings. "It won't be no trouble for us a-tall."

"Thanks," grinned Fenton. "When I get chapped I want it done proper, and done by outlaws. I reckon I'm entitled to as high-toned a chappin' as the sheriff, even if I ain't as fat as him."

As the three clumsily picked their way along the rocky trail in their high-heeled boots, they began to speculate about the man who had taken the sheriff's place on the walk in front of the Casa Saloon.

"That high-steppin' son-of-a-gun!" chuckled Hailey. "He sure could fling his feet."

"The hell of it was he seemed to like it," Cummings added. "He seemed right pleased 'cause them hellions made him prance around like that."

"Hush! You'd a-pranced if you'd had bullets from three six-shooters trimmin' your toe-nails!" reminded Cummings.

The outcome of their talk, however, was agreement that it looked as if the outlaws had been extremely careful, in their wild and hilarious gun-fire, not to actually hit the feet of the man who had called himself Burlson.

"Which," declared Fenton proudly, "looks to me like that feller is somehow in cahoots with them three hombres from the badlands."

Cummings and Hailey agreed that this was probably true.

The sky was brilliantly jewelled with stars by the time the three horses had been gathered. Sad hands lifted Overton, also an old Indian fighter, to a saddle and tied him there.

"Durn it," grumbled Villard, "I sure wish there was some man as'd go into them badlands and clean out the last of them damned hombres as have no regard fur law. I'd do it myself if I wasn't so durned old."

"Well, you needn't worry about that!" swore Slade. "I'm goin' to comb the badlands till they're so clean of outlaws they'll be safe for a woman to live in!"

Before the younger deputies could group aside and comment upon this latest promise of Sheriff Slade's, the latter said they would head for the I Cross Bar ranch, and there spend the night.

"Best get started," he added. "A couple of you waddies will have to ride double on account of Villard's dead horse."

Cummings climbed up back of Hailey, and promptly tickled the latter in the ribs, which caused Hailey to jab the rowels into the sides of his horse, which promptly bucked the two of them off. Hailey hit the ground laughing, and with the bridle reins in his hand.

"Here! You fools!" Slade roared. "This ain't any time for foolishness! There's a dead man there on that horse!"

"But he tickled me," Hailey protested. "And I'm ticklish."

"Aw, I didn't do nothin' of the sort," Cummings denied soberly. "You never was no rider a-tall, and that's proved by the way you was diggin' that bronc in a ticklish spot with your spurs."

"Well, get back on him," snapped the sheriff, "and remember we've had enough foolishness!"

Fenton was ordered to lead the horse that bore the body of the old deputy. Villard, who wanted to be alone with his savage and sorrowful thoughts, led the way as guide across the black plain.

They had covered about half the distance to the headquarters of the I Cross Bar when he reined in, listening. He cupped a hand to an ear. Presently he called softly for the other riders to halt.

"There's somebody comin' out yonder," he said softly. "Heard their hosses plain a minute ago."

"Say! I wonder if them outlaws have managed to get in ahead of us?" Slade whispered as he reached for his rifle.

Cummings, Fenton and Hailey tensed in their saddles, every sense suddenly keyed to its highest pitch. They gripped the handles of their six-shooters as they made out the sound of hoofbeats on the plain.

CHAPTER VIII

IN San Ignacio, as in most other frontier towns, men did not think seriously of the vagaries of another man's character. Therefore it was taken as logical that Bill Burlson should have danced merrily to the notes of the popping six-shooters.

Burlson's dancing when he had been ordered to dance in no way robbed him of the glory that had been his after he had driven away the very outlaws who had made him put on the performance on the board-walk in front of the Casa Saloon. That he had insisted on being paid only fifteen cents by the penurious banker made San Ingacio see that the newcomer possessed more than an average sense of humour. Wherefore the town was ready to overlook his refusal to pursue the outlaws and to pay for enough whisky to get a score of men hilariously drunk.

"I take only one at a time," Burlson told the cordial crowd at the Long Chance.

"Well, how many you expect any of us to take at once?" laughed a cowboy. "You got any way of drinkin' two at a time, mister? If you have I'd sure admire to learn your system."

Burlson took a cigar and surreptitiously gave it to a man who looked as if he enjoyed smoking cigars when they came free.

"Thanks," the man grinned. "I'll save it to smoke after supper."

As supper-time approached, men began to talk about Sheriff Slade and his posse. What chance had they of bringing back the three desperadoes dead or alive?

"Bet yuh a dollar and a half they don't nohow ketch up with 'em a-tall," declared Tibitts, the liveryman, who, with a few drinks inside his tough hide, wagged his head like a sage old billy-goat.

Other men began to dispute this, then looked at Burlson as if he could settle the debate.

"It strikes me," he said, "that the cart is before the horse. Unless something has happened that we don't know about, the outlaws are behind the posse."

"Yuh bet!" declared Tibbitts. "That's why I'm stakin' my dinero on Slade and them deputies of his'n. They'll see the outlaws comin' and trap 'em. It won't be a case of ketchin' up with them hombres a-tall, because they can just naturally surprise 'em and take 'em."

Because of a natural desire for an occasional good time and because of the importance he had assumed as the companion of Burlson, Ben James was too far gone by this time to be at all interested in supper. Burlson discreetly left the hilarious crowd after half an hour and found a Chinese restaurant, where he ate a substantial mean and ate it slowly.

When he went to Henderson's store he found there a tall and lanky man with a drooping moustache of sorrel colour. The man's thick thatch of hair was of the same hue, and he had squinted blue eyes that seemed to regard life with utter impassivity. It was in this manner that the regarded Burlson.

"This here's Luke Longstreet," said Henderson. "Luke is the under-sheriff. He was out at Prosser Creek servin' papers on a poor cowman for Hepsteen while all the ruckus was happenin' here to-day."

Longstreet slowly offered a big, calloused hand, which Burlson took.

"Gladtumeetupwithyuh, mister."

"That goes double, I reckon," accepted Burlson.

Longstreet looked as if it mattered not at all to him whether it went double or not. He slowly rolled a cornhusk cigarette and watched while Burlson made some small purchases. The purchases were of a piece of bacon, a pound of jerky, a little coffee and sugar mixed, a little flour into which the newcomer poured a few spoonfuls of baking powder.

"Yes, and give me a couple of cans of tomatoes," added Burlson.

"Where you headin' for next, amigo?" asked the merchant.

"Just prospecting," returned Burlson. "I've got me a claim back in the hills. How about a sack, Mr. Henderson?"

As Burlson left the store with the sack over a shoulder, he found Longstreet on the dark porch. The under-sheriff plucked at the other man's sleeve.

"You in any hell of a hurry to get to that claim of yours, mister?"

Burlson replied that he did not intend to work his claim before to-morrow.

"Then," drawled Longstreet, "I sure know a man as has a claim he'd like to get some pay outen. You a mind to help, Burlson?"

Burlson managed to manœuvre until the light from the big kerosene lamp in the store illuminated the under-sheriff's leathery face. He said:

"If the game suits me, Longstreet, I'd sure admire to take a hand."

The under-sheriff sat down on the edge of the porch which was loading and unloading platform for the store. He scuffed his worn boots in the dust as if this were invitation enough for the other man to do likewise. Burlson sat down.

Longstreet felt around with a boot until he had located a stick, which he managed to lift with the boots as if he were too lazy to get it with a hand. He opened a big stock-knife and began to pare thin shavings from the stick.

"It's this away," he said. "I rides out to Prosser Crick to-day to serve papers on Joe Smith as owns a little spread out there. Joe's got a passel of brats and a wife as is porely, too. It's this away. Hepsteen, he claims Joe owes him money, and them papers is for that ornery skinflint to take the ranch which is all Joe and his wife and them brats owns."

"How much money?" Burlson asked as his interest

quickened to the point that he reached for the gold pieces in his pocket.

"None," drawled Luke.

"None? Then how come there is a lawsuit?"

Longstreet explained slowly and dolefully, paring off a shaving between each few words. Smith had owed Hepsteen three hundred dollars, including principal and interest, but he had paid the money, not once, but twice.

"Because——" Burlson prompted.

"It's this away," said Longstreet after he had shaved off several skin-thin slices of the stick. "Joe, he ain't no business man a-tall, and what makes it wuss, he's got the damnedest trust in human nature I ever seen. That makes him fail to think of takin' receipts when he pays out hard dinero on bills he owes. Mebbe you've run acrost that sort of men."

"Yes, I've run across a few like that," said Burlson. "In fact I had an uncle who paid on bill so many times he made another man rich."

"Jest like Joe Smith!" Longstreet chuckled. "Joe, he tells me for a fact he's paid that three hundred to Hepsteen two times, and maybe three. He jest dunno the exact number. You see, he and his woman and them younguns of theirn is durned fine folks even if they don't look like much. I sort of figgered you-all might be interested on account of you a keepin' Hepsteen's so-called bank from bein' robbed to-day. Yeah, I heard about that, and about what a durned fancy dancer you are, partner."

"I like to dance," said Burlson.

Luke ceased whittling to give a sidelong glance from one squinted eye.

"Then mebbe a man as likes to dance and don't git excited while he does it would like to sort of—well, you know—help out a man as needs helpin' mighty bad. I give you my word, amigo, as how Joe Smith, he's paid that same bill twice over and mebbe three times. It's legal all right, but durned if it's right. Yuh a-follerin' me?"

"I've got hold of your hind fetlocks," said Burlson. "Go on."

While Luke told his story he had to whittle shavings thinner and more slowly to keep from using up the entire stick. It did not occur to him that he might have hastened his drawling words.

"If Joe Smith was in town——" began Burlson.

"He's here," announced Luke. "I fetched him in. Sort of had the feelin' that somethin' like one of these here miracles might happen. If there ever was a man as needed one of them miracles it's Joe right now. He's honest as hell, but he ain't got even one grain of business sense. You savvy that sort of man, always believin' the other man."

They talked for a few more minutes, then Burlson said: "You find Smith and put him where I want him, eh?"

"Shore."

Henderson, prompted by lack of business in the store and desire to overhear what the two men were saying, had sauntered into his broad doorway, apparently much interested in the noise coming from the Long Chance Saloon and the Casa, where half the men of the town were still celebrating.

"Bring me out a pair of nine shoes and a pair of shaker socks," Burlson ordered as he turned suddenly. "I want good light uppers and medium soles."

The storekeeper, feeling a little guilty, soon came out with three pairs of shoes instead of one.

"Different styles," he explained. "I figured you'd want to take your pick, Burlson."

"Yeah," drawled Burlson. "I'm one of them finicky pickers." He selected a pair of shoes and flung the others into the store.

"Wanted to save you the trouble of totin' 'em in," he explained graciously. "How much?"

"Four dollars. I'm throwin' in the socks."

With feet bare Burlson fumbled in a pocket and handed the merchant a five-dollar gold piece.

"Fetch me out the change in Durham and papers and a few matches," he ordered.

As Henderson turned back into the store Burlson said: "Can you find Hep and tell him I want to see him?"

"Yeah."

The merchant came out with the additional articles, which Burlson dumped into the sack. A few minutes later he was saddling his big bay horse at the livery stable. He tied the sack securely back of the tall cantle of the Cheyenne saddle and led the horse to the hitching-rack in front of the Long Chance Saloon. He tossed the ends of the bridle reins across the rail of the rack, and sauntered to the dark bank.

He had waited for ten minutes when he espied a smallish man, as black as starless night except for the milky white of a starched shi t-front which, in the gloom, showed up like the bosom of a Hereford calf. The man hesitated, stopped as he saw the figure in front of the bank.

"That you, Mr. Burlson? I was told you wanted to see me on some business."

"Me," retu ned the man who had saved the bank from looting a few hours before.

Hepsteen took a few cautious steps and explained that Pedro, a Mexican youth, had come to him with a message that he was wanted. Burlson gr:nned in the dark.

Hepsteen was still cautious, but his gratitude for having his money saved was g eat. He opened the door of the bank, stepped in, lit a match, which he applied to the wick of a kerosene lamp on the counter. This counter, a few rickety chairs and a large iron safe were the only furniture in the place.

Burlson waited until the illumination had been provided, then entered. He closed the door. Hepsteen sidled behind the counter and ginge ly felt for the rusty revolver he kept underneath. He jerked up his hands, however, and his black eyes bulged and the skin above his blackish whiskers turned sickly white as he looked into the unwavering end of Burlson's six-shooter.

"Just a small matter of business, Mr. Hepsteen. You are in no danger at all unless you get bronco."

While the banker stared, goggle-eyed and white. Burlson moved back quickly and with his left hand drew the crocked shade over the single window in the front of the bank. Then he whistled shrilly. A moment later the door began to open cautiously.

CHAPTER IX

OUT on the dark plain Slade and the three younger deputies would have opened fire at the faint noises had it not been for old Villa:d's subdued but vehement warning.

"May be some cattle," said Hailey.

"More likely them damned outlaws," stammered the sheriff.

"Likely neither," disagreed Villard. "Wait! Listen!"

The former Indian fighter was the first to distinguish the noises as the tramp of horses and not of cattle, also that there were more than three animals.

"Hey! Who the hell air you out there?" he challenged.

After a short silence answering shouts came, and even the old plainsman felt relief.

Nine I Cross Bar cowboys led by Hank Ross their foreman, and Pat Ingalls, the rancher, closed in. Ingalls's big voice boomed:

"Who the hell's there?"

Slade began to explain authoritatively, but was cut short by the owner of the I Cross Bar.

"Huh! So you let them three desperadoes get away? What sort of sheriff are you, Slade?"

Slade, thoroughly angry now, and tired, replied that he and his men had done their best.

"They trapped us, Pat," Villard confessed. "It was an old Injun trick and I orter been on the look-out for it."

"Then them hellions are on their way back to the badlands?" demanded the I Cross Bar foreman.

The possemen said they had considered further pursuit of the outlaws futile, especially in the dark.

"Then likely there's no use of me and my riders goin' on after 'em," muttered Ingalls. "We high-tailed it out to help as soon as Kate she arrives with the news of what's happened. Who's that lashed to yon saddle?"

In a cracked voice that shook with sorrow, Villard explained that Overton had been killed by the first volley from the outlaws' rifles.

"Best durned friend I ever had, too," he went on. "It wasn't fitten for him to die that away, Pat. Him and me'd had many a brush with Sioux and Kiowas and Comanches, and I always figgered he wasn't destined to die from no Injun arrer or white man's bullet neither. Poor old Overton!"

"Well, he's daid," drawled an I Cross Bar cowboy as he touched the still burden on the led horse. "Too durned bad, too."

After a short parley it was decided that the combined

party should head for the ranch. It was not until half the distance had been covered that Ingalls confessed that three men answering the descriptions of the outlaws had been at his ranch and eaten breakfast that very morning. He swore prodigiously as he made this confession.

"They rode in and asked me for work!" he snorted. "I ain't in need of any hands at the present time, so I told 'em I couldn't take 'em on. They left for Ignacio soon after Kate rode for town. Must have been in the cookhouse when she left or she'd have seen 'em. You know I always feed men whether I can give 'em jobs or not."

"Sure, sure," Slade agreed.

He and Ingalls now led the way to the ranch, with Villard behind them and the cowboys strung out for fifty yards or more. The cavalcade had not travelled far when Slade heard mirthful chuckles and subdued laughter from the rear. His face turned so red that it felt hot against the chill wind of the summer night.

"Damn it!" he swore under his breath. "Them fool deputies of mine are tellin' that bunch of I Cross men what happened to me in town!"

In the recollection of the happenings of the day, Slade's rage burned to such heat that he silently swore he would comb the bad lands until he captured or killed the last man of the outlaw band, though he knew in his heart that he would never do it.

It was nearing midnight when the party arrived at the ranch headquarters, and late though the hour was, Kate was still up. She had flung a cloak over her white muslin dress and her fluffy black hair was coiled loosely at the back of her neck. She had hurried to the uncovered porch of the adobe ranch-house as she had heard the tramp of horses and the voices of men. Now as the light from an open door fell upon her face, it showed it pale and amazed.

"Oh, I wonder if somebody got Burlson?" she murmured as she made out the load on the led horse. "Oh, but he couldn't possibly have been out there."

The next moment she was angry with herself for having thought she had more than ordinary interest in the man who had called himself Burlson.

"But who—who is it?" she faltered as her pretty face became more tense than before.

Someone told her that Overton had been killed by the outlaws. She moved back and stared in anguish and horror as the dead man was laid on the porch.

"Poor old fellow," she murmured. "I always did like him. And did the outlaws get away?"

She was told that they had. The posse had found it could not follow into the bad lands in the dusk.

Ingalls ordered that Overton's body be taken to the bunk-house and placed on an empty bed.

"This bein' out in the night air ain't a fit place for an honourable old-timer like Overton," he added, and watched with grey head bare as two of his cowboys lifted the body and carried it away.

"You men want something to eat?" he asked when he turned back to the riders.

"Wal, we could stand some hot grub," grunted Villard.

Before the rancher could speak again his daughter announced that she had kept food hot.

"I had a feeling that somehow you would be back soon, Daddy," she added.

After Kate had seen that the possemen were served with food she went to the porch again and stood with the cloak wrapped loosely about her slender body. It was not that she was entirely unaccustomed to violent death, but now a vague and inexplicable sorrow seemed to hang between her and the glittering stars, yet mingled with this was a doubt that made her almost hate herself.

"Darn it!" she murmured as she wrinkled her small, straight nose. "I don't know why I keep thinking about that man, Burlson."

Her troublesome thoughts were swept aside when she heard her father's hearty laugh from where he was watching the possemen as they ate. She did not have to step nearer the open window to know that Sheriff Slade was at last confessing that he had been chapped in the public street by the three outlaws he had tried to capture or kill. She turned, however, to look through the window, for she wanted to see the expression on the fat sheriff's face as he made this confession. He was trying hard to look heroic.

"Damn it, Pat!" he told the rancher in self-justification. "I had nothin' to do but take it. They was three to one, and they took me entirely by surprise when I went down to the

Casa to stop their roisterin'. They was raisin' hell there, shootin' the place up and breakin' things behind the bar."

"Aw, that's nothin' to be ashamed of, Jeff!" laughed the square-faced and grisled Ingalls. "There ain't many growed-up men that don't need spankin' at times."

"I'd spank a heap of 'em, and more'n onct, if I had my way about it!" growled Villard through a mouthful of beans as he thought of how he and his old friend and the others had followed the sheriff into the ambush.

From the expressions on the brown faces of his three younger deputies Slade saw that they were ready to explode into mirth at his expense, and he stammered quickly:

"There's one other man in Ignacio, Pat. I ain't yet dead sure he ain't connected with that badlands gang in one way or another."

The rancher's grey eyes held steadily on the sheriff as the latter told what he knew about the man who called himself Burlson.

"I don't know," Ingalls mused. "He may have danced willingly for the outlaws same as you submitted to gettin' your fat rear end paddled, Jeff."

Slade turned red and his cheeks puffed out until he sputtered food over the checkered tablecloth.

"Submitted willingly?" he roared. "I tell you I was helpless, Pat! Wait till I finish tellin' you about this feller, Burlson!"

Out under the stars now, and close to the open window, Kate Ingalls tried to weigh each word Slade uttered as he offered his opinion of the tall rider who had saved her that forenoon from injury or possible death.

"I wish I knew what he really is! He isn't just an ordinary cowpuncher," she murmured. "Goodness, I wonder if I am actually in love with him? That's silly though!"

In San Ignacio Burlson was thinking neither of Kate Ingalls nor of the outlaws. He reached out a foot and shoved the door shut as a man crept in. The man was tall, but shorter because of a heavy stoop. His grisled face had a hopeless look, and was made more hopeless by a ragged, drooping moutache and squinted blue eyes that seemed to hold an infinite trust along with much fear and timidity. He wore

patched and faded overalls and a bleached cotton shirt equally patched.

"Why—why—hallo, Smith," Hepsteen stammered as he held his bulging eyes upon the end of a six-shooter in Burlson's right hand. "What—what——"

"Evenin', Mr. Hepsteen," Smith stammered. He shuffled his worn boots till they took him a little way from the door. His eyes became brighter as they saw the man with the six-shooter more clearly. "I—I didn't think I was—was comin' in on a hold-up."

"Not a hold-up," Burlson corrected. "I think we shall call it a court of justice, Mr. Smith. I understand you have paid this man three times what you owed him."

Smith blinked, nodded doubtfully.

"Yeah, yeah."

"This is an infernal lie, Burlson!" Hepsteen cried. "Smith owes me two hundred dollars, plus interest! I was lenient with him, but as he could not pay I was forced to start legal action to take his ranch and the few cattle he has on it."

Without taking his cold gaze from the usurious banker, Burlson asked Smith again about the debt he had allegedly paid more than once.

"Yeah, I'm sure I paid him three times," stammered Smith, taking on a little courage. "My woman, I mean my wife, she seen me pay him once."

"And you didn't demand his receipt?" growled Burlson.

Smith replied that he had not thought of a receipt because he hmiself was an honest man. He had believed men with whom he dealt were equally honest.

Burlson ordered him to move closer to the counter in order that he might get a better look at him.

"Yeah," Burlson drawled, "of the two, you're the honest hombre."

Hepsteen sputtered that he had never collected more than once.

"Ask this town whether I am honest, you hoodlam."

"I've already asked part of it," said Burlson as he stepped quickly to the counter behind which the banker stood qualing. "Now you write Smith out a receipt in full for what he owed you, Hepsteen!"

Burlson's pistol remained unwavering as the usurer wrote, and Smith stared with blue eyes that were filled with wonder and gratitude. What miracle was this?

"And now," prompted the man with the six-shooter, "write this. Write that you dismiss all legal action against Smith, his heirs and assigns."

Hepsteen's hand shook, but he wrote as directed.

"Sign it!" Burlson snapped.

He shifted his Colt to his left hand while he affixed his name to the receipt as witness. He thrust the paper towards the amazed rancher.

"Take this and high-tail it for home, Smith. And hide it where you can find it if it's needed."

Smith began to mumble thanks, but Burlson ordered him to shut up and get going. The rancher needed no further orders. A minute after the door had closed behind him Burlson backed towards it.

"Thanks for the small favour to Smith, Hepsteen," he drawled. "I'd advise you to be more careful with your book-keeping after this."

Half a minute later Burlson was aboard the big bay horse and that animal was galloping eastwards. A minute after this Hepsteen burst through the door, and without stopping to lock up rushed for the office of the sheriff, where he found Luke Longstreet dozing, his feet on the pine table he and Sheriff Slade used as desk.

"Huh? Huh?" demanded Luke in his habitual slow voice. "You say that son-of-a-gun made you sign a receipt?" He hit the floor with his boots and straightened long length with unexpected alacrity. "Wal, I'll catch the——! Get out of my way!"

He rushed from the office without thinking to blow out the candle. He found his horse conveniently near, climbed into the saddle and spurred wildly in the direction opposite to that which Burlson had taken.

CHAPTER X

THE unusual events of the previous night failed to keep Ingalls from turning out his cowboys at the ordinary hour in the

morning. By six o'clock all had ridden for the range or gone to work in the hay-fields.

Sheriff Jeff Slade, however, was not so eager to resume work, even riding. He was unused to the saddle, and the morning found him sore and stiff. Besides, he had lost sleep and prestige, which latter was worse than the former. Consequently it was approaching eight when the sheriff sat down to breakfast in the ranch-house. Villard, Hailey, Cummings and Fenton had eaten in the cook-house and were drowsily waiting for the sheriff to get ready to start for San Ignacio.

Pat Ingalls and his wife, a tall, motherly woman inured to frontier ranch life, remained with Slade, but their daughter, dressed coolly this warm forenoon in checkered gingham, went to the porch to be alone with her troublesome thoughts and to look down the road that led towards town. To her it seemed incredible that only yesterday forenoon she had first met Bill Burlson at the fork of the road.

"Why—" she gasped as a horse at a gallop rounded the grove of cottonwoods beyond the last corral, "why—there he is now, I think!"

Kate knew instantly that the rider was the man about whom she had thought so much during the twenty-odd hours just past. He had the same easy swing in the saddle, the same nonchalant air as if he did not care a rap whether he remained there or landed head-first on the ground.

As Burlson waved a hand Kate had a frantic desire to turn and run into the house. Then her chin was up and she was telling herself she would run from no man, and especially not from this one.

He slowed his bay horse to a trot, then to a walk as he neared the house. He lifted his Stetson, and again she saw his wavy blond hair. He was smiling whimsically, and the look in his eyes seemed to speak of pleasure at seeng her again.

"Good-morning, Katie," he said soberly. "You sure do look fine."

The girl had to compress her lips to keep from returning his friendly greeting in kind. She said stiffly:

"Good-morning."

He squinted one eye at her.

"Didn't sleep well last night, Katie? Bet you didn't."

"Whether I slept well or not is none of your business, Mr. Burlson."

"Sure it ain't," he grinned. "You know, I sort of like you, Katie."

"Well, I hate you!" she flared. "What are you doing here, anyway? My father doesn't need any—any second-class cowpunchers!"

"I am——" he began.

"Oh, yes, you're a top-hand bronc-peeler," she interrupted. "Well, we don't need any top-hand bronc-peelers, either."

"I am," he resumed, "looking for some outlaws. Have you seen any?"

Her dark eyes widened, then smouldered. So he was looking for outlaws, was he?

"I suppose," she said, mimicking his slow, drawling speech, "that you are honing to do some more dancing to the tune of their popping six-shooters?"

"Nope. I'm getting ready to make the other fellows do quite a little dancing."

"You are?"

"I am. It would help me a heap, Katie, if you would tell me whether you've seen anything of three hombres wearing the outlaw brand."

Kate was finding him more of an enigma than he had been yesterday, and was valiantly trying to puzzle him out when she saw Villard and the three younger deputies coming towards the porch.

"Hyar, you, dancer!" called the former Indian fighter. "What you doin' hyar?"

Kate wanted to storm at the men to keep back, that it was her right to talk with this man and try to determine to her own satisfaction just who and what he was. Hailey, Fenton and Cummings grinned as they stopped.

"How're your hoofs, pardner?" Fenton injured dryly.

"Are they as limber as they was in town yesterday?" Hailey grinned.

Burlson removed a foot from a stirrup and shook it as if it itched to dance. With some surprise Kate saw that the foot was encased in a new shoe instead of a high-heeled cowboy boot.

"Now I know he isn't any ordinary puncher!" she whispered to herself.

"Them," remarked Cummings, "is better for dancin'. You must have done some more high jiggin' last night."

"No jigging," corrected Burlson. "I'm expectin' to do some walking, and you know about high-heeled boots."

"I know they ain't wuth a durn for walkin'," broke in Villard. The old deputy was trying to decide about this stranger who had a gunnysack with something in it tied back of his saddle cantle.

Hailey, Cummings and Fenton, recalling the scene in front of the Casa, broke into loud laughter, and slapped their legs. Even old Villard chuckled merrily, for he, too, had witnessed the chapping and the dancing. Kate smiled.

In the dining-room Slade ceased his simultaneous chewing and telling about how he had failed to capture the three outlaws. He growled thickly:

"What's all that racket about out in front? There must be somebody out there, by——"

The sheriff's sudden rage was not because of the unexpected arrival of a horseman, but because he thought the laughter in front of the house was brought about by a discussion of his humiliating experience in town the day before. He growled that he would put a stop to this fun-making, and gulped down a big mouthful of hotcake and bacon.

With Pat Ingalls and his wife at his heels, the sheriff was ready to kill to atone for his humiliation and failures of yesterday as he reached the front doorway. There he stopped short. On a big bay horse, not thirty feet away, sat the very man who had been his immediate successor as victim of the three hilarious outlaws.

Like cement that sets instantly Slade's brain hardened with the concrete verdict that here was the man he wanted. If Burlson were not actually an outlaw, at least he could tell how the three badlands desperadoes had managed to escape.

"Grab your ears, Burlson!" the sheriff roared as he dragged at a pistol. "I'll kill you so dead you won't skin if you don't get your hands up!"

As the grin the appearance of the fat sheriff had caused faded from Burlson's face he kneed the bay hard and at the same time dug with a spur-rowel. The horse spun quarter-round on its hind legs as Slade's forty-five roared.

The sheriff's shot had been fired within five feet of Kate, and as she clapped a hand over her right ear she saw something red and liquid spurt from the saddle and form a crimson parabola on its way to the ground. She gasped and was sick with horror. Her eyes were wide as she saw Burlson race wildly away, crouching low over the neck of the bay.

"Open up on him, you fools!" roared the sheriff as he scrambled from the porch and began shooting fast at the fleeing rider. "There's the man I want! Shoot him, you fools! Shoot him!"

Felton, Cummings and Hailey jerked heavy revolvers from holsters and began shooting. The cracks of the four guns made noise comparable to that to which Burlson had danced in San Ignacio the previous afternoon. But now the tall stranger was not using his nimble feet. The rangy bay horse was using his, and so effectively that within a very few seconds its rider turned in the saddle and waved a parting hand.

"Hasta luega, amigos!" he yelled. "Thanks for the good shooting!"

"Get your horses, men!" Slade thundered. "Get mine! We've got to get that hombre, dead or alive! We've got to get him dead or alive, I tell you!"

Old Villard growled that he was too stiff to ride hard, and that besides he had seen his best friend killed in the previous dusk. By the time the sheriff and the three deputies had got their horses, Burlson had half a mile lead, with the bay running in smooth, long strides.

Though sheriff and deputies spurred cruelly and exerted their fresh horses to the utmost, the bay lengthened its lead to a mile within the following half-hour as its rider apparently headed for the trail that skirted among the broken ridges and ravines at the southerly tip of Pine Mountain.

Presently Slide shouted for his men to halt. As they circled and came back he panted:

"There ain't no use tryin' to catch that hombre on that horse, damn him! I wanted him bad, too!"

"What for?" Cummings demanded.

"Yeah, what for?" added Hailey. "We didn't know why we was chasin' him."

"What for?" roared Slade. "Because he's one of the outlaws!

The deputies, who had enjoyed Burlson's dancing exhibition and had later liked him as they had sized him up more critically, demanded to be told why the sheriff thought him one of the outlaw gang. Slade pointed a shaking but dramatic arm towards the horse and rider, steadily becoming smaller on the grassy plain.

"How do I know he's one of the badlands gang?" he growled. "Just take a look at him! Ain't he headed for the badlands right now, the same as them murderin' three did last night?"

As the four rode slowly back towards the headquarters of the I Cross Bar, with the glum sheriff well ahead, the deputies could not agree on whether the man they had failed to stop was an outlaw. On one thing, however, they saw no reason for argument. They were agreed that Burlson was headed for the badlands, and along the same route as that taken by the three outlaws the previous night.

Kate Ingalls tried to watch the flight and pursuit, but her eyes were drawn back to stare at the reddish liquid that had sprayed the dust. Why had she thought so bitterly about the wounded man? Still, if he were an outlaw he needed worse than mere wounding. She turned her head again towards the chase, half-expecting to see Burlson reel from the saddle. Then again her horror-filled eyes were drawn back to the ground near the edge of the porch.

Villard, who had ideas of his own, took little interest in the race after he saw that the man on the bay was out of range of revolver lead.

"Gee whizz, Kate," he asked, "what makes you look so durned white?"

She pointed a trembling hand towards the wet trail.

"Look! Look, Mr. Villard!"

"Yeah, I see."

"But—but don't you see what it is?"

"Why yeah," he grunted, "but mebbe I'm wrong."

The sprayed wet trail in the dust was not red except where little red lumps dotted it like clots of blood. One of these red clots and some reddish liquid lay upon a dusty flat stick, which the old Indian fighter picked up.

With fear-filled eyes Kate watched as the old-timer squinted at the stick. Then she drew back and tensed with

repugnance as he moved the stick close to his grisled lips and stuck out his tongue.

"The old beast!" she gasped silently. "He's going to taste it!"

Villard licked the wet trail across the stick, smacked his lips as he squinted thoughtfully. Then to add to the girl's amazement and horror, he stuck out his tongue again and caught up the red clots as a dog would have done. He drew his tongue back into his mouth, chewed a few times as if appreciatively, and swallowed.

"Why—Mr. Villard!" the girl managed to gasp. "You swallowed that!"

"Shore. Why not?" the old deputy asked soberly.

"But it was—it was blood, sir!"

"Blood?"

"Of course it was blood! I saw it spurt from that man as Sheriff Slade fired!"

"Huh," corrected the old man disdainfully, "that there wasn't blood."

"It wasn't blood? Then what in the world was it?"

"Termatters."

"T-tomatoes?" Kate stared at him in wild-eyed incredulity.

"Yep. Termatters. That there hombre must've been chuck full of termatters, Kate. Me, I seen 'em spurt like red blood, too, when Slade shot. Gal, I seen many durned queer things in my life, but this hyar is the fust time I ever seen a man bleed canned termatters instead of blood. Don't that beat all holler?"

Kate's knees were suddenly so weak that she knew they would not bear her weight any longer. She knew, too, that she must reach some spot where she could either laugh or cry, perhaps both. She whirled and fled into the house as she saw her father and mother coming.

"Say, Villard, what's so durned funny?" she heard her father demand. "Tell us, we want to laugh too."

Kate reached her bedroom, but not soon enough to shut out her father's big, hearty laugh. She flung herself on the bed and burrowed her face in a pillow.

"Canned tomatoes!" she sputtered. "C-canned tomatoes! And I thought he was bleeding! And now they'll make as much fun of me for this as they did of his

dancing there when those outlaws were trying to shoot off his toe-nails!"

CHAPTER XI

FOR more than an hour Kate Ingalls fought for composure. She was finally distracted from her own thoughts by a sound in front of the house. Her first thought was that the posse had captured Burlson and was bringing him back. Or perhaps he had been killed!

Kate was not certain whether she wanted him brought back dead or alive. In fact she was not sure that she wanted him brought at all. She hurried to bathe her face in cold water and rearrange her hair. She tried not to appear breathless as she approached the doorway, but the moment she looked through it she felt weak with disappointment, and with pleasure. There on a horse sat Ben James, the I Cross Bar cowboy who had taken two days off and gone to San Ignacio.

As she stepped to the porch Kate saw from the looks on the faces of her father and mother and Villard that the cowboy had brought some startling news.

Ben's eyes were bleary and his grin sickly and sheepish as he saw the girl. He waved a very friendly hand, however.

"Howdy there, Kate. Where you been? Jus' get outa bed?"

"Never mind where I've been!" she snapped. "You've been drunk!"

"Yep, that's the truth," Ben mumbled. "I been. And I reckon I ain't all the way back yet. You hear the big news, Kate?"

"If your being drunk is big news, then I've heard it."

The cowboy stared owlishly at her.

"Aw, that ain't news, Kate. You know I'm always doin' that when I get the chance, and the dinero. Nope, the news I got is honest-Injun big news. You recollect that buen amigo of mine, that feller named Burlson?"

The girl compressed her lips and nodded, trying to suppress her fear that Sheriff Slade and his deputies had some-

how captured Burlson and were taking him to San Ignacio instead of returning to the ranch with him.

"Bes' friend I ever had," Ben rambled. "Say, Kate, that there feller wouldn't let me spend a dime for——"

"I suppose," Kate said witheringly, "that both of you got drunk!"

Ben looked at her reproachfully.

"Burly get drunk? I should say not! Kate, that there is where you're shure barkin' up the wrong tree. Burly, he wouldn't nohow take more'n one drink at a time."

"Well, if he took them often enough——"

With indignant words and many gestures that caused him to weave dangerously to right and left in the saddle, Ben explained that one drink with Burlson meant one drink, and that when he had drunk that he was through.

"But what's that to me?" Kate inquired icily. "He was here a while ago and he didn't look——"

"Drunk," supplied Pat Ingalls.

"No siree," approved Villard. "That jasper was clean sober."

"He ain't never any other way, folks," declared Ben with more gestures. "There's man what's a hero, Kate! Bes' durned amigo I ever had. Ask him and he'll tellyuh same thing."

"And," Kate accused, "you ought to be ashamed of getting drunk and staying that way, Ben."

The cowboy reproached her with bleary eyes, and then flapped two wobbly hands at her.

"Ain't! Ain't ashamed of nothin', Kate. That's cause I got 'quainted with Burly. Shure is a honour to get 'quainted with a man like him. It's durned big honour, 'most as much a honour as bein'——"

"You up and tell her, Pat," Villard suggested. "Ben, he's been resortin' to too much whisky gabble."

However Ben was not to be denied the privilege of repeating the news he had brought. He slithered from his saddle and placed a confidential hand on the girl's shoulder while he blew his alcoholic breath in her face. Though repelled, she stood her ground after she had heard her father's first sentence and a longer one stammered out by the cowboy.

"What? You mean he kept Hepsteen's bank from being robbed, Ben?"

"Hell, yes! Whatcha think I'm tellin' yuh, Kate? Now you listen! No, I'll draw map to show you just how them mavericks come back to town. It was Burly with them two new six-guns of hisn as—as—say, Kate, I helped him pick out them new six-guns. Forty-fours, too. Best durned pistols old Henderson had. And five boxes of shells, too. And a brand new rifle! Say, I shure can shoot good with that rifle! Kate, you just wait till I draw this here map for you. I'm plumb good at drawin' maps, make you understand same as me, and——"

While he squatted unsteadily on his heels and with a stick made what he thought was a plan in the dust, Kate heard from her father the story the cowboy had brought. When Ingalls had finished telling it Ben was still tracing the routes into and out of San Ignacio that the bandits had used on their second visit.

Bright spots showed on the girl's cheeks and her eyes were aglow.

"Did he actually do that?" she cried. "Oh, but I don't see why he didn't kill at least one of those outlaws!"

"That," informed Ben as he sat down in the dust with a grunt, "was 'cause of them new pistols. They wasn't broke in yet. Say, Kate, you 'spect a man like Burly to kill a durned bandit with a gun as he hadn't never fired before? Gun's just same as ridin' a horse as wasn't broke, bound to pitch. It wasn't 'cause he wasn't doin' good shootin', it was 'cause them durned guns was so new and untamed they was pitchin' and crow-hoppin'. New pistols always does that away."

"No such thing," contradicted Villard. "Any new weapon don't need breakin' in pervided it's sighted keerect."

"The hell it don't!" Ben argued as he scrambled to his feet. "That's all you know 'bout new guns, you old buzzard! Now you just listen, old-timer, and look here!"

With feet wide apart and pistol waving dangerously to and fro, Ben endeavoured to demonstrate how each of Burlson's new guns had almost cut Burlson's forehead with its front sight as it had been fired at the outlaws.

"Just like that!" he declared thickly. "I tell yuh I seen plenty new guns pitch and buck, same as broncos. Wasn't his fault a-tall."

"What's puzzlin' me," put in Villard as his brows knitted, "is why he didn't at least wing one of them fellers. The range couldn't have been long for a forty-four Colt."

"Yeah it was!" Ben contended, swinging a wide gesture with his own loaded Colt to demonstrate his unwavering loyalty to Burlson. "It was long 'cause them new pistols wasn't broke in. Say, he was tryin' as hard as me to hit 'em, 'cept I was usin' that new Winchester he'd bought and it was empty. Lemme tell yuh how that durned mag'zine hadn't never met up with a single kettridge."

They had to listen while Ben took ten minutes to tell how he had tried to kill the three outlaws with an empty rifle, and while they listened they all wondered why Burlson himself had not done better shooting. The range from Henderson's store to the bank was an easy one for a forty-four Colt. Could this apparent attempt to thwart the robbery have been some sort of play, Kate wondered. Could Burlson have been trying to leave the impression that he was after the outlaws, while in reality he was one of them? It seemed to the bewildered girl that he could have at least dropped a horse or two, thus leaving one or more outlaws dismounted.

"Say, this whole thing looks mighty durned fishy to me," Villard grumbled. "I never was no good with a six-shooter myself, but right now I'll bet my last centavo I could hit one man out of three at that range, at least if I emptied two guns at 'em like that feller did."

"I believe I could, too," Ingalls agreed, "and I never did claim to be a shot with a pistol."

As Ben James stared at them reproachfully and with much misunderstanding, he rubbed the straw-coloured stubble on his chin.

"Say! What you two tryin' to put your loop on?" he demanded.

"They are trying to tell you that Burlson didn't want to kill those outlaws, Ben," Kate explained. "Don't you see?"

"Don't I see what?" Ben shook his aching head.

"Oh, for goodness' sake! Don't you see that they are trying to tell you Burlson wasn't actually trying to kill those robbers? They mean he was probably one of them and for some reason—I don't know what it was—he wanted to get them out of town."

"So's he could foller 'em," said Villard. "Yeah, that there shootin' sure sounds plenty fishy to me. I done handled plenty new guns in my time, and——"

"You never had one pitch when you shot it for the first time?" Ben snarled angrily as he gripped his own weapon. "Say, looky here, Villard, you might've learnt a little 'bout Injuns, but what you know 'bout new Colt forty-fours wouldn't fill even a durned little book. Hell, I could write 'er on this here finger-nail!"

"It looks to me like what he says is right, Ben," put in Ingalls quietly. "I reckon that feller Burlson could have hit a man or a horse if he'd been tryin' to."

Realization of what they meant suddenly permeated Ben's brain. His homely face lost its sickly flabbiness, contorted.

"You folks a-sayin' as how my amigo Burly ain't all right?" he snarled as he gripped the handle of his holstered gun. "He's the best durned amigo I ever had, and I don't care who says he ain't! Just ask him!"

Then his resentment was immediately displaced by the recollection of an additional argument in favour of Burlson. He looked imploringly from one to anther.

"You savvy Joe Smith as runs that little spread on Prosser Crick?"

They replied that they knew Smith.

"Starvation rancher with a passel of young 'uns and a few cows," remarked Villard.

"Durned good honest man!" Ben corrected. "You just wait till I tell you what my friend Burly done for him, how he up and saved him a heap of dinero! Yes siree, Burly he done just that!"

Ben had not finished his rambling and much gesticulated story before Kate was wondering what kind of man Burlson really was. One moment she was certain he was a member of the badlands gang, and the next——

"That there was a helluva way for Hepsteen to treat a pore honest man what ain't got no head for business!" Ben declared with a flourish of arms. "Now I'm askin' you if the way Burly done got that receipt for Smith don't prove he's a fine honest hombre with plenty sand?"

Pat Ingalls offered no comment. It was common knowledge among the ranchers that Hepsteen collected time after time from men who lacked the business sense to demand

receipts. The rancher glanced at his daughter and saw a strange smile on her pretty face.

They were discussing this latest escapade of the stranger to San Ignacio when the sheriff galloped up, followed by Hailey, Fenton and Cummings on horses as sweat-lathered as his. Slade dismounted, stood with fat legs braced wide while he demanded a complete retelling of the news Ben James had brought from town.

Ben consumed all of a half-hour in the telling, but, before he had finished, the sheriff was convinced he had the proof he needed that the man he and his posse had pursued across the plain was really travelling to join his confederates in the badlands.

"I'm needed in town!" declared Slade, who was weary and saddle-sore. "If Luke Longstreet'd had the savvy of a loco coyote he'd have caught Burlson in town last night."

The sheriff was striding towards his horse when he was stopped by Ben. Slade whirled impatiently.

"What you want now, James? I haven't got time to listen to any more of your whisky talk. I have to reach town and see how much of it is true!"

"Just a minute, Sheriff, just a minute!" Ben ordered as he brandished his arms. Suddenly he became confidential and moved close to the red-faced Slade. "Say, Sheriff! You know what Luke needs? Do yuh?"

"No," growled Slade impatiently, "I don't know what he needs, unless it's to get some sense into his fool head!"

"Nope, that ain't it," declared Ben, coming closer. "He needs somethin', though, and needs it durned bad."

"Well, what the hell is it?"

"He needs a good wallopin', Sheriff, with a pair of chaps!"

Uttering an angry snort while his face turned redder, Slade dragged himself into his saddle and spurred away, calling to his deputies to follow. The three younger men who had ridden with the posse turned their jaded horses and headed towards town behind Slade, but Villard made no move to leave the porch.

"I'm comin' in in one of Pat's buckboards!" he shrilled indignantly. "Maybe you've forgot how Overton's entitled to a decent ride to the graveyard, Slade, but I ain't!"

CHAPTER XII

THE sheriff reached town in the middle of the hot afternoon. He was immediately surrounded by curious and eager men who wanted to know why the outlaws or their dead bodies had not been brought in. They wanted to know, too, where Villard and Overton were.

"The boys'll tell you about it," Slade declared importantly after he had eased himself from his saddle. Then he added, "We sure had one tough chase, men."

He waddled into his office, and there found his under-sheriff. Luke Longstreet appeared to be the least excited man in San Ignacio. He opened his eyes with much effort, but did not feel it necessary to exert himself to the extent of grinning with welcome or surprise or any other emotion.

"Wal, howdy, Jeff."

"Howdy hell!" Slade exploded as he slammed the door. "I understand that that feller called Burlson as good as robbed the bank last night by makin' Hepsteen sign a receipt in full for that lazy Joe Smith!"

"Ye-ah," yawned Longstreet.

"And you knew about it?"

"Nary a thing till Hep, he comes gallopin' in here last night, red-hot under the collar and a-tellin' me what's happened."

Though he wanted to roar in anger to draw attention from his own failure, Jeff Slade was more tired than he had been for years. He groaned as he gripped the arms of a chair and lowered his bulk into it.

"Bottom hurt?" Luke drawled.

"Hurt all over!" exploded the sheriff. "I been in the saddle practically every hour since I left here yesterday!"

"Quite a time," Luke remarked sleepily. "Ketch 'em?"

"Catch what?"

Luke looked puzzled and rubbed his nose with a forefinger.

"Why, lemme see. I sort of had the notion you went after some outlaws, Jeff. Or was I dreamin'?"

"By the eternal, you wasn't dreamin'!" Slade growled.

"Ketch 'em?"

"No, I didn't catch 'em! But I might have if I hadn't

had to high-tail it back here to see about this Smith and Hepsteen business! What about it?"

"Why—it's all settled up, Jeff."

Slade vehemently declared that the obtaining of the receipt had been robbery by fear and coercion.

"Good business," Luke corrected. "Yeah, I reckon it was durned good business."

"Robbery," growled the sheriff. "It was plain robbery. I heard you chased the man, Burlson."

"Sure. By gosh, I did chase him," Luke agreed. "What you think I'm under-sheriff here fur, Jeff?"

In the hope that his assistant would not refer to the public chapping he had received or to his failure to bring back the men he had gone after, Slade grew a little less belligerent. He asked for Luke's version of the affair at the bank. The latter explained in about two hundred slow words.

"What I can't understand," said Slade as he looked profound, "is why Burlson didn't wing at least one of those men who tried to hold up the bank in the afternoon."

"Pore shootin', I reckon."

Slade made the creases a little deeper in his fat forehead.

"I don't know about that, Luke. The whole thing sounds damned unlikely to me. Do you suppose Burlson just wanted to scare those robbers off? No, what I mean is do you suppose Burlson himself might have been in cahoots with them three?"

Longstreet's interest quickened as the sheriff asked this question. He drew himself upright in his chair.

"Now you said somethin', Jeff!" he declared. "Say, I was settin' here mullin' over that same thing like a dominicker hen tryin' to hatch an ostrich-egg. Funny, ain't it, how great minds run in the same groove?"

Slade frowned thoughtfully, then slapped a leg.

"Yes, sir, Luke, I'm convinced that Burlson is one of the badlands outfit! No, wait till I tell you about him showin' up at the I Cross Bar."

The under-sheriff listened, his long face bright with interest while Slade told of the attempt to kill Burlson, and the subsequent pursuit.

"Just what I was scared of," agreed Luke. "I never seen a man ride as good a horse as that long-coupled bay

unless he had some reason for wantin' to get away from places faster'n ordinary horses could take him."

This unanimity of opinion caused Slade to forget that he had suffered indignities at the hands of the outlaws.

"Then you actually believe Burlson is one of that bad-lands gang, Luke?"

"As I was a-tellin' you, Jeff, I was settin' here mullin' it over like a dominicker hen settin' on a ostrich-egg a-tryin' to hatch it. There ain't no other way to it. Hell, I'm sure he orter kilt at least two of them robbers as they come out of the bank. One never even went into the bank, and he could've got him easy. He was out there all the time holdin' the horses. Say, lemme tell you how that feller Burlson made Hep write that receipt in full for Joe Smith and how I chased him till durned near mornin'."

Slade smiled and waved a hand of dismissal.

"That's nothin'. Don't waste time on it, Luke. I guess Hepsteen had made Joe Smith pay him before anyway. Besides, even a bandit can have his little joke." The sheriff leaned back in his chair now and chuckled mirthfully. "Luke, I'd have given a dollar to have seen Hepsteen as he wrote that receipt!"

"Ten dollars," Luke corrected. "Betyuh it hurt old Hep like he was havin' a tooth pulled with a claw-hammer."

Slade laughed again and said the sight would have been worth twenty dollars to him.

"Yeah, yeah, even an outlaw must have his little joke, I reckon, Luke."

"Yuh see," drawled the lanky under-sheriff, "mebbe it was just a leetle of the so-called milk of human kindness, Jeff. Somehow he must've learned how Joe Smith had paid that there bill five or six times and he—well, he sort of takes it on to hisself to ease his own conscience by seein' as how pore old Joe wouldn't have to pay no more. It was durned white of him, if you ask me, Jeff. Sort of shows there's a little good in the wust of men."

As it was now the sheriff's purpose to clean the outlaws out of the badlands without attending to the hazardous job personally, he tried to be subtle by admitting that Burlson had undoubtedly been animated by human sympathy.

"Yeah," Luke drawled, "I reckon the feller's still got one short tit that gives that sort of milk, Jeff."

Slade agreed that probably this was true, but was prevented from saying more on the subject by a look he saw on Luke's face.

"Yeah, yeah," Luke muttered, philosophizing profoundly, "outlaws and cowboys will have their little practical jokes, eh, Sheriff?"

Slade turned red. His cheeks puffed out and his fat-lidded eyes slitted.

"Luke Longstreet!" he roared. "If you're referrin' to that chappin' I had to stand for, I want you to remember that it wasn't any joke with me!"

Luke's eyes widened in innocent amazement.

"Why, Jeff, I wasn't even thinkin' of that there chappin'. Say, I wish I'd been there, I'd sure have put a stop to it. Imagine them three hellions a-paddlin' our sheriff!"

"Well, I don't need any imagination!" Slade snapped. "As you know, they caught me by surprise—before I could draw and cover 'em, Luke."

The under-sheriff leaned back again, let chin drop to chest. He drawled:

"Aw, sure, Jeff, I savvy how you felt about it. But looky here. What's troublin' me is how did Brulson learn that Joe Smith had paid Hepsteen, seven or eight times, the same durned bill?"

The sheriff waved an impatient hand to indicate that the troubles of the banker were of little comparative consequence.

"I'll ask Joe about that the first time I see him."

"Yeah," Luke advised gravely. "Do that."

Slade rose, looked through a window to where Cummings, Hailey and Fenton were talking to a noisy crowd.

"Well," the sheriff told himself comfortingly, "an officer has to have his reverses at times." He lit a fat cigar, set it in an end of his mouth and pondered deeply. This done, he sat down on the table where Luke was resting his worn boots.

"Say, Luke, did you get to see much of this Burlson?"

"Why, yeah, I talked with him quite a spell, Jeff."

"Good. Then you won't fail to recognize him in case you see him again?"

"Hell, no! I'd know his brand anywhere!"

Using all the subtlety at his command and trying hard not to forfeit authority or appear lacking in courage, Slade led up to what he wanted.

"You know, Luke, you're one of the best officers in the whole South-West. That's why I made you my under-sheriff, and it's somethin' I ain't never regretted. Now look here, you know Burlson's brand. What's the matter with you goin' into the badlands and bringin' him out? I'd do it myself if I wasn't honest enough to admit that you're a heap better fitted for the job."

Luke had snapped upright and his eyes had lost their squint and were filled with pleasure and surprise.

"Say, you want me to do that, Jeff?" he demanded with genuine animation. "You mean it? And just when I been settin' here a-trying' to hatch out somethin' that would mean a real job for me, one that was big enough for my abilities. You really mean it?"

Endeavouring to appear only mildly enthusiastic and to continue the admission that of all the officers he knew Luke Longstreet was the best fitted in courage and mental abilities and tactics to undertake a dangerous job, Slade said that he really meant what he had proposed.

"Yes, sir, Luke! If you come back here with Burlson and even one of them other damned outlaws, you'll be the next sheriff of San Ignacio. Yes, sir, I can promise you that! I'll tell you what I'll do, Luke. I won't even run next election."

Luke's gratitude for this generous offer was profound and grave to the point of tearfulness.

"When you figger I best start?"

"Well, if I was doin' it," said the sheriff who now felt that he was to be vindicated and without personal risk, "I'd sneak out of town before daylight. That will make it possible for you to be well out on the Pine Mountain trail before anybody here suspects you have left town, Luke."

CHAPTER XIII

AFTER his escape from the sheriff's shot, Burlson felt no fear of capture. He knew the speed and bottom of the bay horse. Now after he had seen his four pursuers stop, then turn back, he maintained a steady gallop for another half-mile.

For a minute following his hasty departure from the I

Cross Bar headquarters he had felt something wet on his right leg, and had thought his horse had been hit; until he found that the bay ran unflinchingly. Now, turning in the saddle, he discovered where the moisture had come from. He grinned.

"Slap bang into one of my cans of tomatoes!" he chuckled aloud. "That's luck. Well, tomatoes are red and so's blood. I wonder what sort of omen that is?"

Loosening the saddle strings, he swung the sack around and rested it on the horn. Examination disclosed that both cans of tomatoes had been punctured by Slade's bullet. Burlson looked soberly at the lurid labels on one of the cans.

"Well, I'm sure glad you hit it instead of me, Mr. Sheriff." he said. "But just the same, I'm going to make you buy me two more cans of tomatoes some of these days."

He tied the sack back of the cantle again, and looked eastwards to where four riders were still visible.

"Mr. Sheriff, I've got another bill to collect from you. Just when I was trying to make a good impression on that girl, you had to horn in and do some rotten shooting. I never did see a fat man who made a good sheriff."

Burlson's thoughts remained mostly pleasant, though he frowned when he thought of how he had escaped Slade's hasty bullet. He became meditative, and finally his sun-browned face broke into a grin.

"Well, after all, he did about as well as I did when I was trying out these new guns of mine on those three across the street in San Ignacio."

As he jogged on, Burlson examined his new weapons with meticulous care, testing their balance, their action, aiming them at targets. When a coyote trotted from a patch of sage he fired negligently. The coyote dropped.

"That's better, much better," the man on the bay horse told himself as he substituted a cartridge for the empty shell. "Glad I didn't shoot at that fool sheriff. Might have hit him, and that wouldn't have done before Katie. Katie's a nice girl."

Knowing the general direction he wanted to follow, Burlson came to the Pine Mountain trail. He saw the comparatively fresh tracks of three horses, comparing with the number of men who had tried to hold-up Hepsteen's bank.

He grinned when he thought of the last time he had seen the banker.

"Man hasn't any right to collect a single bill more than once. Just the same, I'm afraid I won't be mucho popular with that gentleman after this."

Burlson had not ridden far when he saw buzzards on the ground and circling above. He came to a dead horse from which gear had been stripped. Dismounting, he soon discovered that the animal had been slain by a bullet. His interest quickened, for at the I Cross Bar he had not learned of the fight between the posse and the outlaws.

A quarter-hour of exploration here showed him that there had been a battle, and that probably the officers had put up their fight from near the southerly side of the first ravine. By the time another quarter-hour had passed he had come to the conclusion that the outlaws had escaped unscathed. He stood beside his horse for a few minutes.

"Now it looks like somebody did worse shooting than I did there in town, doesn't it?"

He held no doubt that the tracks made by the three horses in the Pine Mountain trail were the ones of animals ridden by the same men who had raised so much trouble in San Ignacio the previous day.

Burlson stooped, picked up a few handfuls of sand, which he put in a pocket of his jeans. Then he stepped into his saddle and headed northwards. As he rode, reins loose on the neck of the bay, he used the sand to scour the varnish off the red cedar handles of his new six-shooters.

"Must have been that slippery grip that made me do such rotten shooting," he mused aloud.

After he had the grips of the weapons amenable to more adhesion, he drew the long rifle from its scabbard, examined it carefully. He was still examining the Winchester when he came to a spring that providentially gushed from under a cap of lava. He saw that the three men who had travelled this way before him had stopped here to water their horses.

"Likely no more water for quite a way," Burlson told himself. He drank deeply, then removed the bridle from the mouth of the bay, stood thoughtfully as the horse drank its fill. He rebridled the animal, but allowed the reins to remain down. He slowly fired a few shots at near and distant spots with the long Winchester, reloaded the magazine.

"About as good as a fellow can expect from a new, factory-sighted gun," he decided as he replaced the weapon in its scabbard.

He pressed steadily onwards, following a vague and deceptive trail. On some stretches the wind had drifted the trail so full of sand that the horse plodded fetlock-deep in it. Only upon scant rises did he dimly discern the tracks of the three shod horses.

The heat was stifling when the sun was on meridian, and for two hours afterwards. Then the dust-devils slowly ceased their deverish dances, and a dead, motionless heat settled over the desert.

After an hour of this the mesas were much nearer and from them began to come vagrant puffs of wind which within another hour had become a steady breeze with a slight coolness in it.

Burlson now saw where the trail wound into the bad-lands. When the sun lacked two hours of setting he was riding into the narrowing portal of a rugged canyon whose walls became vertical less than a mile ahead. The vagaries and violence of the winds had not worked here, and the three horse-tracks were plain in the hard-packed trail.

"Reckon I'm on the right route," Burlson decided with a grim chuckle. He looked hard at the cliffs, at each mesa, each patch of brush. The air was cool, with even a slight chill in it when he came to where vertical walls stood at each side of a grassy floor not more than two hundred yards wide. Chaparral and scrub manzanita grew against the bases of the cliffs. Winding ahead through the grassy level was a water-course now arid but showing indication of having been a moderate freshet at times.

The canyon continued to narrow. For stretches its walls were not fifty feet apart. In it the soft gloom of early twilight prevailed, though as he looked upwards between the grey walls Burlson could see that the sun still shone upon the mesas.

So this was the pass through the badlands, he mused as he rode slowly on, eyes vigilant for possible water. Grass was abundant, though dry. Burlson had learned from the under-sheriff that this canyon, which severed the badlands like a snaky gash, was approximately thirty miles in length.

His lips were actually cracking now, and he spat "cotten" over a swelling tongue. He did not think so much

of himself as of his horse. They had travelled twenty miles through an aridity that sucked the moisture out of everything except the cacti and horned-toads and rattlesnakes.

Burlson was about decided that they would find no water until late in the night when he saw before them a place where the cliffs opened out like a primal amphitheatre with grey, towering walls.

Over a jumble of boulders and brush that jutted in from the right, Burlson approximated the width of the grassy circle at about four hundred yards. The light was better here, and he was a little puzzled by the ledges on the left wall some two or three hundred yards away. They were as if some ancient had begun to hew a trail up the face of the precipice and had quit when the job had been a third done.

Burlson did not give much attention to this, for he soon noticed that his horse had thrust its ears forward. The tired animal quickened its gait, stuck its nose flat ahead, sniffed. The tired and thirsty rider could feel the eager tremble of the horse under him.

There ahead, where the jumble of boulders and brush almost touched the wash, were two pools of water that reflected back the blue sky and small portions of the grey cliffs.

Wanting the horse to drink first, Burlson leaned forward and removed the bit from its mouth. He himself would dismount and refresh himself at the actual spring, which appeared to run from the very tip of the bolders which were half concealed by brush.

Burlson had not straightened after removing the bit when he heard something whizz over his back like an angry hornet. Before he had time for any thought the cliffs began to reverberate and echo with the report of a rifle.

Even as the first waves of the unfamiliar sound smote its ears the bay jerked up its head while it blew water from fright-distended nostrils.

"Get to hell out of here, Pete!" Burlson snarled as he hit the bay hard upon the left side of the neck with the flat of a hand, while at the same instant he dug hard with the left spur rowel.

As the horse whirled, lunged up the bank down which it had slid, two more shots rang out. Eager as he was to gain cover, Burlson decided that the man with the rifle was

somewhere on the zigzag ledge that looked like an ancient trail part-way up the cliff at the left.

As he gained comparative level, Burlson spurred the horse until it, and he, were hidden by the point of rocks and brush. He jumped from the saddle, reinserted the bit in the mouth of the bay, dropped the ends of the bridle reins.

"Stay there, Pete. I've got to see whether you and I travel any farther on this trail."

At a running crouch Burlson went back towards the end of the point of brush and rocks. As he neared it he bent lower and lower, for through openings in the brush he caught glimpses of the darkening ledge. He saw a large boulder ahead, ran for it. As he started to drop behind it to try to discover the man who had been shooting, a bullet spanged off the rock.

Something like wires of red-hot iron burned across Burlson's head. He felt his hat lifted, and dully heard the report of a rifle. He wavered for a few seconds, toppled over backwards, twitched, lay still.

CHAPTER XIV

KATE INGALLS did not sleep well that night, and because of this rose later than was her habit. She was at breakfast when she heard her father hail somebody in front of the house. She was at once hopeful and frightened. Had Burlson returned? He had come at about this time the previous morning. Well, if he had come he could wait until she wanted to see him.

Then she was aware that she wanted to see him immediately, if only to attempt once more to decide who and what he was—outlaw or courageous, honest man. She had spent perhaps half the night trying to decide this same problem, but was no nearer its solution than she had been when Burlson had ridden hastily away the day before leaving the red trail that had momentarily horrified her. What made her problem the more distressing was that Burlson had fled in front of a posse, and along the same route taken by Jackling, Arkett and Tobin.

As she came to where she could see through the front doorway, Kate felt angry with disappointment, yet at the same time weak with relief. Out there was not the handsome Bill Burlson at all. On a sorrel horse sat homely, lanky Luke Longstreet, looking as if he would as soon go to sleep in his saddle as sit there and talk with the rancher.

Kate stopped inside the shadow and listened. Luke was telling Pat Ingalls that he was out after an outlaw known as Burlson because the man had forced Hepsteen, at the point of a gun, to sign a receipt in full of Joe Smith's account.

Of course Luke was telling the truth, she knew, for he wore two filled cartridge belts and as many holstered revolvers, and the varnishless stock of an old rifle projected from a scabbard slung under the left stirrup-fender of his saddle.

"But damn it, Luke," Ingalls expostulated, "you know as well as I do that Hepsteen'd make any man pay ten times if he didn't take a receipt."

Luke waved a conciliatory hand.

"Sure. That's all right, Pat, but what you're completely overlookin' is the point of law involved. This here jasper, he entices Hep to the bank by sayin' he's got some business to transact with him that can't wait till mornin', then when he gets old Hep there he points a cocked pistol at him and makes him sign that paper I was a-tellin' aboot."

"He should've shot Hepsteen's head off!" grunted the rancher. "Once I was in a tight fix and had to borrow a thousand dollars from him. That was years ago. He forced me to pay him two per cent a month. He'd have tried to collect the principal over and over if I hadn't taken a receipt in the first place."

"Aw, we ain't talkin' about what Hep is or what he ain't," Luke drawled sleepily. "There's the point of law involved."

"I don't give a damn if it was a barrel of law!" Ingalls snorted. "I hope you never catch up with that Burlson. It's common knowledge all over the county that Joe Smith paid Hepsteen two, three, yeah, maybe four times."

"I'll ketch up with him," Luke insisted with strange stubbornness.

As she watched and listened, Kate was not sure whether or not she wanted Burlson caught, though she was pleased by her father's vehement defence of the man who had saved her

from death or serious injury when her saddle had slipped on the back of the crazed horse.

"Luke," Ingalls demanded, "you got a warrant for this feller?"

"Huh? A warrant of 'rest?" Luke patted the pocket of his faded cotton shirt. "I sure have, Pat. As a peace officer, I never go after a fugitive without the proper papers. No, siree! Hep, he swears out a warrant for that slick hombre."

Kate could not see inside the pocket of the shirt, but dangling from it was the round disc of a packet of Bull Durham.

"Fugitive!" she whispered, and wished somehow that Luke had not used the word. She continued to eavesdrop, and heard that the under-sheriff was headed for the badlands, where he said Burlson had taken refuge.

"I got a line on the way he took, all right. Pat, you ought to knowed me long enough to know I don't take the scent of a polecat when I'm out after a wildcat. No, siree, not me!"

Kate felt a mild chill now as she recalled that of the men associated with Sheriff Slade, the one outside was the one who usually brought back the fugitives after whom he went.

She found it impossible to remain longer as an eavesdropper. Luke's eyes widened and his face looked as if he had at last awakened when she hurried to the porch in her bright calico, with her hair coiled at the nape of her neck. She tried to keep her real emotions out of her eyes.

"Wal, dawggone me if it ain't Katie!" Luke drawled. "Say, gal, you sure are lookin' like you never had a worry in the world."

"That's right, Luke," she laughed, and tossed her dark head. "And why should I worry?"

"Wal, mebbe you'd worry a leetle if you had to go out like me and fetch in a mal desperado, Katie."

"Luke's startin' out after that man, Burlson," her father explained. "I don't somehow envy him his job, Kate."

"Is he?" the girl asked innocently. "Well, I think Luke will bring him back."

The under-sheriff's weathered and homely countenance brightened again.

"Bet your durned life I will, Katie! Fact is, I'd be willin' to stake real dinero on that."

"How much dinero?" Ingalls demanded defensively.

Luke rubbed his nose, then his chin as if the nose and refused to yield result.

"How about a hundred dollars, Pat?"

"Done!" snapped the rancher. "Kate, run into the house and get me five twenties."

Luke was standing on the ground, not unlike an old horse half asleep, when Kate returned. He began to jingle gold pieces in a calloused hand.

"Here y' are, Katie," he drawled. "You hold stakes."

She took the money from him, then put her father's five double-eagles in the same hand and clamped her slim brownish fingers over them.

"The terms of this wager, Kate," instructed her father, "are that Luke is to fetch Burlson back dead or alive. If he fails to do that inside a reasonable time I get the dinero. That right, Luke?"

Longstreet bobbed his head until the brim of his limp Stetson flopped.

"Dead or alive?" Kate exclaimed.

"Don't you want that outlaw brought back dead if Luke can't bring him alive?" demanded her father.

"Might have to rub out the son-of-a-gun," explained Luke. "He's plenty dangerouse, 'cept from what I hear he ain't such a good hand with six-shooters. 'Course, Katie, if you insist on me fetchin' him back alive, likely you have your reasons for wantin' it."

Kate found she could not toss her head to show that it was no concern of hers whether Burlson was brought back. "Naturally I'd hate to think of anybody being killed, Luke, even an outlaw."

"'Well, some of 'em sure need killin'," growled Ingalls. "There are hard men in the badlands. That's why me and the other ranchers gave up tryin' to run cattle on the good feed over towards the Martaña Mountains."

"Plenty bad," Luke agreed absently, for he was looking at the girl. "Say, Katie, you know this Burlson feller, don't you? Heard you rid into town with him the other day."

"Yes, I know him," she answered stiffly, and turned pink.

"Huh?" her father demanded. "Say, you never told me and your mother anything about this. What about it, Kate?"

"Well, I—I thought it wasn't worth telling about," the girl flared, resorting to anger to mask her troubled emotions. "I had a suspicion at the time he was not too good a man."

"Too good?" Luke drawled. "Say, Katie, that good-lookin' hombre is sure plumb bad."

Ingalls glared at his daughter, but did not question her about her meeting with the man who in two days had caused much comment in San Ignacio county. Kate knew what her father's silence meant—he would question her later. She wished she had never heard of Bill Burlson.

Nevertheless she could not keep from thinking of him, try as she would. Outlaw though he probably was, she shuddered when she pictured him riddled with bullets somewhere out in the badlands. As Luke said he would have to be rambling along, she found it impossible to keep silent, but cried:

"Wait a minute, Luke! When Burlson tried to get those three men who were holding up Hepsteen's bank, were you there? I mean the three who chapped Sheriff Slade."

The under-sheriff did not smile when the discomfiture of his superior was called to mind, but looked so sorrowful that the ends of his eyes and of his mouth drew down, and his long moustaches seemed to droop in sympathy with his doleful thoughts.

"No, sir," he sighed. "That was one of the damnedest times of my life, Katie. I mean 'cause I wasn't there to keep Jeff Slade from bein' spanked. Wasn't it just orful and humiliatin' to see the plump rump of the law paddled with a pair of chaparejos, and then same chaps in the hands of an outlaw, a durned outlaw that the sheriff wanted bad?"

"Why, I didn't think it was so sad," Kate said, and dimples formed in her round, tanned cheeks. "I was there, Luke."

"'Sad hell!" Ingalls exploded. "It was just what Jeff Slade needed, even if I did help him to get elected to that office. Durn him, he hasn't done a thing worth mentionin' since he got to be sheriff. Say, Luke, why didn't he go into

the badlands after this man, yeah, after the others, too, instead of sendin' you?"

"Now, now, Pat," Luke admonished sleepily. "Don't go off half-cocked. It was this away. Jeff, he tells me he's goin', and I up and beg him to let me do the job 'cause I'm so much better fitted to do it than him. Don't be unfair to Slade, Pat. He was just dead set on goin' till I begged him to let me tackle the dangerous job. You see, I ain't done much 'cept serve papers and 'rest a few drunk cowboys now and then since I been Jeff's under-sheriff."

"Which is a lot more than Jeff Slade has done himself!" snorted the rancher.

Luke, however seemed to have said his say on this point, for he refused to offer further argument. He was staring sleepily at Kate, who seemed to be doubtful, yet a little troubled.

"Say Katie," he drawled, "you say you was actual there and seen that chappin'?"

The girl replied that she had witnessed it, and interrupted her story with peals of silvery laughter as she told how the three badlands outlaws had chastised the sheriff.

Luke's long, wrinkled, homely face refused to reflect one iota of her mirth, however, though he was inwardly very appreciative of the girl's story. He wagged his head sorrowfully.

"It was orful disrespectful to the law as it is represented by our sheriff," he moaned. "I got my doubts as to whuther San Ignacio'll ever complete get over it, that is the humiliatin' disgrace of it."

"Just what Slade needed! Just what he needed!" the rancher declared. "My only regret is that I wasn't in town to see it, Luke."

The under-sheriff said he did not have time to argue about it, and dragged himself into the saddle like a sloth going up a tropical tree.

"Wal, mebbe I'll be back in a month or two with that feller Burlson. Adios, folks."

But Kate Ingalls found she could not let him go without asking one question. She overtook him as he approached the first corral, and grabbed the strings at the side of his saddle pommel.

"Want to climb up behind me and see if we can't both

fetch back that mal hombre, Burlson?" Luke asked as he looked drowsily down into her demanding face.

"No, I don't! Stop there just the other side of the corral, Luke."

He complied with her order, then looked down at her again, and prompted:

"I don't mind waitin' till you git a pair of pants and a six-shooter."

"Oh, I don't want to go with you after that fool, Burlson!" she cried. Then she fought to make her face and her voice only mildly interested. "Luke, what do you think about him? I mean do you think he actually tried to kill those outlaws when they were in front of the bank? Do you think it was because of his new pistols that he didn't get even one of them? You know he had just bought a couple of new Colts from Mr. Henderson."

Luke Longstreet rubbed his nose, then the tip of his chin with a long forefinger. His face took on an almost philosophical look.

"That there," he said, "is somethin', Katie, that has got miles and miles of the seriousest thinkin' from me. There seems to be just one common-sense way out of it, just one common-sense way."

"And what is that?" she demanded eagerly.

"Wal," Luke said with funeral gravity, "there's only one way to look at it, as I was sayin'. It's that the pore shootin' he done there at the bank shows there must be some connection between Burlson and them fellers that tried to hold up the bank. I done owned too many six-shooters in my time for any durned feller to tell me a man can't shoot fairly akkerate with a new pistol. Wal, Katie, I gotta be ramblin' along if I'm ever to ketch up with that Burlson. Adios."

The saddle srings slipped through the girl's limp fingers as he touched the horse with the spurs. Kate stood for a minute staring after him unseeingly, then turned and walked slowly back to the ranch-house.

"Oh, I wish he wasn't an outlaw," she murmured. "There is something so—so likeable about him!"

CHAPTER XV

A MAN ran down the crooked ledge, quickly, as if he had been there at least a few times before. He was hawk-faced, of medium size. The white of his uneven teeth showed in marked contrast to the swarthy skin of his lean face.

As he reached the grassy level he shifted his rifle to his right hand and quickened pace to a dog-trot. He slowed as he slid into the wash a few rods below the cottonwoods that shaded the pools. He looked eager and sinister and much pleased.

"Damned fine shot I made!" he gloated. "I sure put a period after that hombre."

Digging in with the toes of his high-heeled boots, he climbed the bank, stopped. Thirty yards away a big bay horse stood with reins down. It regarded the new-comer with pricked-ear interest. Nearer, a man lay sprawled at the edge of boulders and brush. The killer's teeth bared in a sinister and pleased smile.

He was unable to resist a desire to see how his bullet had hit. With the barrel of his rifle in the crook of his left arm, he strode forward, black eyes intent. He was within fifteen feet of the sprawled man when a pistol roared as if from the ground itself.

The swarthy man shivered like a stump riven by a bolt of lightning. A look of utter incredulity came over his face. His knees buckled, but the power to see and recognize had left his eyes when the tall man with the bloody face sprang to his feet and wiped the blood away from an eye with the sleeve of his shirt.

"Sort of traded places, didn't we?" drawled Burlson. "Sorry, but out here in the badlands it sort of looks like it was the custom for a man to shoot first and talk later."

Burlson held his Colt at his hip. With blood from his scalp wounds smeared over his face, he looked desperate and savage. He bent to make sure the man was dead.

"Too bad it had to be done that way," said Burlson. "Fellow, if you had come out in the open I'd have been happy to shoot it out with you."

He glanced down at his revolver, smiled twistedly.

"You seem to be all right now," he told the gun. Damned if I see why you and your pardner went back on me the way you did in town the other day when I was after those hombres at the bank."

In all he did, Burlson never sacrificed vigilance. Now he waited until the twilight had thickened almost to dusk before he went to the pool and washed his face and head. He found that splinters of bullet, deflected from the rock, had cut three gashes on his scalp. One had broken the skin and raked the bone above his left temple, thus causing shock that had left him unconscious for a moment or two. He wound his scarf tightly about his head, grinned.

"Look like a warpath Apache," he soliloquized. "Well, this does sort of look like war."

Getting his rifle, Burlson cautiously explored the grassy circle by keeping close to the bases of the cliffs. He found nothing that would cause him to suspect that there had been more than one bush-whacker. That one man had left his horse in a thick clump of mesquite.

Leading the horse, Burlson went to the first pool, where he let the animal drink. Then he took off its saddle and bridle, and slapped it on the rump. The horse trotted towards the desert, stopped. Burlson hit it with a stone and it broke into a wild, free gallop and rounded a point of cliff. For a minute he could hear the dimming echoes of beating hooves reflected from the high walls.

He had time now to think of his own horse. He had already seen that the jumble of rocks and brush made a good breastwork against discovery or attack from the north, and grinned when he decided that the next time there seemed chance of a bullet he would not show his head and shoulders above any rock.

He did not risk turning his horse loose, though Pete was camp broke. He picketed the bay with a short riata he usually carried. He pondered for a few minutes over the advisability of lighting a fire. The desire for something hot prevailed, and against some rocks and brush that faced the pass in the direction from which he had come he kindled a small blaze over which he broiled bacon, and made coffee in a can he had brought for that purpose.

He raked dirt over the coals as soon as the food was cooked, and ate his meagre supper in darkness alleviated only

by the glitter of the cold stars that shone down between the walls.

The meal over, he smoked a cigarette with the glowing end cupped in the palm of a hand. Then he dragged the dead man close to the brush, and over him built a cairn of rocks.

"No doubt one of the outlaws, but just the same I don't want buzzards tearing him to pieces. I wonder, though, if he'd do as much for me."

As he lay upon the still warm ground, Burlson tried to weigh his problem, for he felt he had one. He was certain he should continue to travel during the night in order that when daylight came he would be nearer the northerly border of the badlands.

Utter weariness argued against this, as did the possibility of encountering more desperadoes during the night. There would doubtless be narrow stretches in the canyon, and angles of the walls where at almost any time he might ride directly into an outlaw camp.

After fifteen minutes of this pondering, Burlson dragged his saddle nearer and put his head upon it. He spread the sweaty saddle-blanket over his legs and closed his eyes. Before sleep came to him he listened to the moaning of the wind across the high mesas and its duller sounds as some of it dipped down the thousand-foot cliffs and sucked towards the desert.

"Glad I've got this point here to get into the lee of," Burlson muttered. "It'll be frio before morning."

When he awoke he saw that the tops of the cliffs were greying. He felt chilled to the bone, and his first coherent thought was of a roaring fire. He found it hard to resist making one, for there was much dry brush close by.

He moved Pete to a new patch of gramma grass, and looked at the spot where he had made his little fire the night before.

"If nobody interrupted my supper," he mused, "I reckon I ought to be able to take a chance on a hot breakfast."

His breakfast was like the other frugal meal, except that he added a chunk of jerky.

Now the first sunshine was brightening the highest points of the westerly walls, creeping slowly down them. Burlson did not hurry, for he was still far from actually warm, as it

was shady here and the cool winds still blew from the mesas.

He was ready to mount when he thought of the saddle he had taken from the horse of the man he had shot. He placed it and the bridle on the rock cairn and stood for a minute or so, musing.

"Now I wonder if that damnéd fool meant what he said?" he chuckled.

Then with the point of his knife he wrote in the seat of the saddle:

"THIS HOMBRE PUT UP AN ARGUMENT, BURLSON."

As he rode northwards with the sun creeping down the westerly cliffs, Burlson had time for thinking, and the coming warmth of the day seemed to make his brain more active. He reasoned that if the three outlaws who had visited San Ignacio had fled ino the crooked pass they would likely keep going until they reached headquarters.

"What bothers me," he said half-aloud, "is whether that hombre who came so near to braining me was there by accident or was he sent back by the others to cover their trail?

With characteristic recklessness Burlson told himself he could not answer this question. The bushwhacker could have seen a strange rider by accident and actually have had no connection with the main band of outlaws.

Though he kept vigilant watch, even to leaning back in his saddle to look at the tips of the cliffs, Burlson decided that after all it mattered little where the bushwhacker had come from. He had attempted his kill from same ambush, and it was probable that if had been sent back by the three outlaws they would decide he had done it well.

For not more than half a mile in any direction was the box canyon comparatively straight. It widened into embryo grassy valleys only to narrow again to reaches not more than fifty yards wide where the sun seldom shone and the air was still chill.

Burlson was aware that almost any spot on either rim offered safe ambush. He was aware, too, that at almost any turn or screen of brush and rocks at the bases of the cliffs another bushwhacker might be waiting for him. Though these things were by no means heartening, he felt no diminu-

tion of his grim purpose. He had to find the hang-out of the outlaws, and particularly he had to find the three men who had made him dance to their gun-music in front of the Casa Saloon.

"Well, I sure hot-footed it for that town," he smiled, for even now he was not without his humorous musings.

As he rehearsed the happenings in San Ignacio his vigilant look-out relaxed a little, though he was not aware of this until a bullet kicked up dirt and dust twenty feet to the left of his horse and the roar of a rifle came down from the mesa.

As he clamped the rowels hard against the sides of his horse, Burlson looked up and saw two men silhouetted on the rim at his left and a thousand feet above. Another bullet lifted a geyser of dust ten feet nearer, but this time at the right. Burlson leaned lower, for he had heard the wasp-whine of lead over his head. He hit Pete again with the spurs.

CHAPTER XVI

In a flash Burlson remembered that bullets fly high when fired at a steep angle. He reined to the left and began a swift, zigzag course. He was surprised when only two more shots were fired at him. He glanced upwards. The two men were no longer outlined against the sky.

"Likely reloading," he told himself, and did not slacken his erratic run.

Dry grass, dust, gravel flew from under the drumming hooves of the big bay. Burlson leaned low, but kept his head turned part of the time to anticipate a new volley if possible. No volley came, but he did not stop to see why.

The comparatively level floor of the gorge turned abruptly to the left, then, after a hundred yards bent sharply in the other direction.

Burlson found that within half an hour he was at the beginning of a horseshoe bend perhaps two miles in length. As he neared its northerly end, which as the crow flies was no more than half a mile from its beginning, he saw before him a large jumble of boulders and slabs which in distant years had slipped from the high mesa rims. There seemed no trail at all through the labyrinthian jumble.

Burlson hauled the bay horse to a stop, peered ahead. He saw where horse-tracks led in among gigantic boulders and slabs. Following them, he looked up at the rim every few seconds, for he had no wish to be shot at again from above.

After weaving through the first obstacles, which in spots were so close together that he had to lift feet from the stirrups to keep from "barking" his legs, he discovered that the way ahead was better. Some plutonic convulsion had shaken sandstone from each overhanging rim. It had fallen in such a manner that the two masses had met, thus forming a short and rocky pass. Among the boulders manzanita and chaparral had grown until it made an impenetrable tangle of brush except in the very narrow space where the trail had been worn.

Burlson stopped as he gained the foot of the little pass where human hands had smoothed the rocks enough that a horse might travel the trail if careful of itself and carefully ridden.

"Guess I best take that on the hoof," Burlson decided. "There's no telling what may be on the other side."

As he dismounted he drew his rifle from its scabbard. He pulled the reins over the head of the bay and was about to begin leading the willing animal when something whined ominously off a rock three feet to his right. Instinct and love of the horse made Burlson drop the reins and leap ahead as the roar reverberated from wall to wall. As if he had seen what had occurred on the horseshoe mesa, Burlson knew that at least one of the men who had fired at him well back, with accurate knowledge of the winding canyon, had raced to where he could shoot down into the rocky pass.

As a second bullet spanged off a rock, glanced upwards and whistled from the face of the cliff, Burlson threw himself to the rock trail and flopped to his back. He saw a man lean over the brink of the precipice, which at this spot was fully fifteen hundred feet high.

As Burlson slowly raised his rifle and pressed its butt-plate against his shoulder and put pressure on the trigger, he wondered whether there were more than one man up there. He had no doubt the two he had seen were outlaws, and from the distance tried to recognize the man above as one of the three to whose roaring music he had been forced to dance

in San Ignacio. He was putting the final squeeze on the trigger when the target disappeared.

"Damn it!" he gritted, and squirmed to brace his back more firmly against a rock while he waited, eyes narrowed and sights lined on a certain spot far above.

It was not that Bill Burlson was impatient. He merely wanted to settle one way or another with the man above who had tried to kill him.

After a moment something appeared from the rim. It looked no larger than a good-sized willow switch, but the man below recognized it as the barrel of a rifle. Then the man behind the rifle showed part of his body. The barrel swung downwards and Burlson, eyes lined upon his own sights, imagined that he could see cold and deadly eyes peering along the barrel of the weapon aimed at him. He pressed trigger.

His rifle roared. From far above there was inertia for a second. Then the thing that had looked like a willow switch shot outward, began to fall. Then something that somehow reminded Burlson of a great clawing human fly leaped over the rim. At first it seemed to hang suspended in the air, outlined against the flawless sky. Then it fell, hurtling downwards with incredible swiftness, growing larger and larger as it approached.

With feet and hands Burlson clawed upright, scrambled up the trail. Was the man going to hit him?

The body struck within ten feet of the bay's head. The horse snorted and backed up, but did not bolt. Amid the boulders and brush the outlaw lay, a dead and bloody thing, crushed as if it had been run between two titanic slabs as they had tumbled from the walls. Burlson was staring in horror when he heard something rush past his right ear with the venomous and angry speed of a hornet. A split-second behind the hornet came the report of a rifle.

As he sprang towards the snorting, shying horse, Burlson realized that he had been silhouetted on the summit of the little pass. He breathed gratefully as he ducked out of sight.

'" Now that was luck!"

Knowing that whoever had fired at him from beyond the pass would make noise if he tried to reach the rocky gap, Burlson peered at the rim from which the outlaw had hurtled. There might be a second or even a third man up there, a man

not as dead as the one who lay ten yards away, crushed and broken.

Burlson knew the peril of his position. If there was even one man on the easterly rim he could fire down, and probably would after having witnessed the fate of the man on the opposite rim. And he would use much more caution. Burlson looked at the easterly rim, saw only its natural irregularities—some stunted sage and what looked like dead-brush, some rocks. He shrugged.

"Well, maybe I've cleaned up all the high-fliers," he growled. "Now let's see what's on the ground."

He broke a crooked branch from a dead manzanita, then crept up the trail. He almost crawled as he neared the summit. Here the boulders at the opposite sides of the trail were no more than three feet apart. The marks of shod hooves on soft sandstone showed that many horses had passed to and fro on this rough trail.

Burlson slipped cautiously behind the bolder at the left of the trail, listened. There was utter silence, except for the droning of the hot wind in the crevices and grottoes of the cliffs.

"Now we'll see what we can see," he muttered coolly, though conscious of the danger from the rims.

He tied his red bandanna handkerchief round the dead manzanita branch about a foot from its larger end, then put his Stetson over the end of the stick and took mental measurements of the gap between the boulders.

"Now if a man came up this trail——"

He tried to lengthen his arms as he moved the stick and hat into the gap between the boulders. It was no more than there when a rifle cracked from not far to the north. The hat was whisked from the end of the stick as if blown by a gust of wind.

"Hallo! There's a hole in my ten-dollar sombrero!" Burlson gritted. He forgot the hat and the stick, and clambered to where he had seen a notch above the boulder behind which he had been hidden. Gaining the notch, he looked at a triangular level, well grassed. Distributed indiscriminately upon this level were many large mesquites.

Burlson was not an Indian, to push the barrel of his rifle ahead of him. He peered through the notch, showing a minimum of hatless head.

Out there, close to the foot of the rocky trail, were several large boulders similar to the ones through which Burlson and his horse had threaded their way. He was looking over them at a man and two horses among some mesquites two hundred yards away when another man stepped from behind a rock fifty yards distant, whipped a rifle to his shoulder and fired.

The bullet clipped a chip from a rock not a foot from Burlson's head. He felt the sting of rock-dust on his face.

"Now that wasn't such bad shooting," he remarked softly.

Instead of dropping back, he dragged up his rifle quickly. He scrambled upwards a little in order that he could whip the weapon to his shoulder. It was not a certain shot, because the man beside the boulder was squeezing the trigger of his repeating rifle.

Burlson felt something red-hot singe his hair. He saw dust spurt upwards twenty feet beyond the boulder as the man jumped to cover behind it. A little reckless now, Burlson risked showing more of himself. He glanced a bullet off the rock behind which the nearer man was hidden.

"Throw some rock-dust into his eyes anyway," he chuckled and did not have time to slide back before the man with the horses sent a bullet that clipped off a piece of sandstone much too close to Burlson for comfort.

"Now those two ain't so bad, are they?" he asked himself whimsically when he was out of danger. He thumbed cartridges from loops of his belt, pressed them into the magazine of the new Winchester. As he did this a bullet made a sharp, rasping sound as it raked along the trailward end of the boulder behind which he crouched.

"Use up your powder," Burlson chuckled softly. "Me, I've got to figure out a way of getting out of here."

Only so far as his horse was concerned did Burlson think of the back trail. Down there amid the rocks the bay was safe from the northerly gunfire. Burlson was congratulating himself because he had to face but two men who evidently wanted much to kill him when he was startled by the slap of a heavy slug against his rock.

"Buffalo Sharps," he muttered as the heavy boom of the weapon rushed between the walls. "Now if that hombre ever hits me, it's curtains."

"Well," he decided, "three ain't so bad."

No, three were not insurmountable. There had been four a little while ago. One had come down from the rim in a hurry.

Burlson reached out with a foot and dragged his hat to where he could pick it up. There was a hole through the three-dent crown. He grinned, and mentally congratulated the man who had made that hole.

Now began a steady bombardment. Hardly thirty seconds passed that a bullet did not flatten itself against Burlson's boulder or spang off a nearby rock with a shower of leaden spray. Burlson's fighting jaw clamped. He couldn't let those mal hombres out there do all the shooting.

"And I'll be damned if I'll hit the back trail," he declared, and meant it, though he was certain he could reach his horse and beat a safe retreat.

He knew that if he went ahead he had to do so past the three men who had already demonstrated to him that they knew how to sling lead.

"Maybe they'll smoke me out," he mused grimly as he decided there were no more men on the rims, and began to look for some comparatively safe spot from which he could return the fire from the north.

CHAPTER XVII

ABOUT the middle of the afternoon of the second day after Burlson left San Ignacio, another stranger arrived. This man came in a high-wheeled top buggy drawn by two long-legged grey horses. He was a raw-boned man past middle age and bore the unmistakable marks of rancher, though it was evident that he was one of character and means.

His craggy face, because of the intelligence of the crow-footed blue eyes, might once have been more than ordinarily good-looking. His suit, a rusty grey, had perhaps cost the price of two fat steers, and his broad black hat looked as if it had been worn carefully for a long time.

He drove directly to Tibbitts' livery stable and ordered the best of feed and care for his team.

"They'll git it all right," agreed the liveryman.

The stranger took a worn valise from the buggy and went to the hotel, where, without the formality of registering his name in the dog-eared book that lay limp on the pine counter, he ordered a room. This oversight caused no special suspicion or speculation, for the book was often neglected.

"Won't need the room till night," he told Mike Hill, the hotel proprietor. "I want to mosey round your town for a while to get the stiffness out of my legs."

"Too bad you wasn't here a couple days ago," offered Hill. "There was big doin's."

"Yes?" queried the stranger, polite but not much interested. "A celebration of some kind?"

"Celebration? Hell, no! Three desperadoes from the badlands up north showed up here, mister, and they sure raised hell while they was here!"

The stranger took a cigar from an upper vest pocket and lit it studiously.

"Yes? That must have been exciting. Nobody killed?"

Hill chuckled and said that nobody had been killed even if there had been a good deal of shooting.

"The shindy winds up by them three doublin' on their trail after they'd left town, and comin' back and tryin' to rob the bank yonder. Young feller as had just hit town foils the hold-up. I hear tell his name was Burlson or somethin' like that."

The stranger gripped his cigar with firm lips, and frowned.

"Burlson, eh?"

"Yep, that's what I been told," said the hotel man. "I didn't get the chance to ask him his name. He did plenty shootin' at the durned outlaws, but they got away."

Again the stranger frowned.

"Likely this Burlson was some cowboy who figured he was a gunman," he said with a disinterested shrug. "As for the hold-up, such things happen from time to time in almost all the Western towns."

Though Hill was eager to entertain his guest with a full story of Burlson, he had to be satisfied now with a look at the man's broad back. Out on the walk the new-comer to San Ignacio removed the cigar from his lips and frowned as he looked at the hot and dusty main street.

Picking out the big frame store across the street as representative of money and stability here, he walked slowly towards it.

"Howdy, sir," he said to Henderson, who was not busy.

"Howdy," returned the merchant. "I saw you drive in a while ago."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't have to walk," remarked the stranger amiably as he removed his hat and mopped his broad forehead with a bandanna, thus showing that his hair was thick and silvery. He asked a few questions about the state of business and about the ranches in the vicinity.

"Own cattle?" queried Henderson.

"I have owned a few from time to time," said the stranger as if he did not want to be discourteous, though at the same time giving the impression that he considered his affairs his own.

The storekeeper was like the majority of other San Ignacio citizens. He felt that the unusual happenings of the past few days had given the town a reputation not to be found in every frontier village. The new-comer leaned against a counter, smoking with apparent mild and interested amusement while Henderson told about Burlson. Suddenly he removed his cigar from his lips and laughed heartily. He even slapped a leg.

"So those desperadoes made him dance to the tune of their six-shooters, did they?"

"They sure did!" Henderson chucked. "Yes, sir! But the funny part of it all was the way that young buck used his feet when them bullets were barely missing his toenails. Men who were nearer than me told me he was not a bit scared."

Henderson had all but finished telling how the bank robbery had been foiled by a man who had bought two new Colts in this very store when he hesitated.

"Say! I haven't asked your name, stranger."

"Adam Ferguson."

They shook hands. The merchant said:

"Glad to meet you, sir. My name's Henderson."

"So I judged by your sign," agreed the visitor. "Well, what else did that loco waddy do? It looks to me like he did some poor shooting at those robbers."

"It wasn't good," the merchant agreed, then told how it was suspected that the shooting had been a bluff, that many of the townspeople suspected that Burlson, for some unknown reason, was actually a member of the outlaw band, and that he had taken that risky and noisy method of telling the three desperadoes to get out of town as fast as they could.

Ferguson shifted the cigar to the end of his mouth.

"And did they git?"

"Did they git? Well, they sure kicked up dust!"

Ferguson frowned now for a full minute, as if he were visualizing what had occurred and trying to discover motives for it.

"It does look sort of fishy," he muttered. "It's not a long range for a forty-four across this street. It was lucky though that Burlson didn't get hit, wasn't it?"

"Most folks hold the opinion that the robbers weren't tryin' to hit him," declared Henderson. "Men are sayin' that they shot back at him just to make the whole thing look genuine."

"What's your opinion of that?"

"Well, I sort of hold to that theory, Ferguson. With all the shootin' there was, it looks like somebody ought to got hit."

Adam Ferguson smiled faintly, nodded.

As the merchant believed he had a good listener who was also a man of means, he thought it worth while to entertain him, and next told how this same Burlson had forced Hepsteen to sign a receipt in full for Joe Smith, a starvation rancher.

"Well, well!" said the new-comer, and his eyes seemed a little more kindly than they had been. "What's your opinion of this? Do you think Hepsteen had collected the money from Smith before?"

Henderson, thinking of business he might lose or gain, pondered heavily.

"It's possible," he admitted. "Joe Smith is a mighty poor business man. Fact is, he ain't got any business sense at all."

Ferguson took a small notebook from a vest pocket and with a stubby pencil made a straight mark on a page the storekeeper could not see. He closed the notebook, put it back in the pocket.

"Well, that wasn't exactly business, forcing a man to

sign a receipt in full at the point of a gun," he declared. "It might have been justified though."

Henderson said there were many men who had little or no sympathy for the banker. Ferguson shrugged.

"A man's usually best known in his own town. At least that's been my observation."

The merchant agreed without committing himself. He was beginning to repeat details of his story when the newcomer asked:

"Where can I find this fool Burlson now? I think I'd like to take a good like at him."

"Likely that'll take time," Henderson answered. "The last heard from him was when Sheriff Slade and a posse chased him away from the I Cross Bar ranch and he headed for the badlands. It's said he was on his way to join the rest of the gang that hangs out up there in that rough country.

"Headed for the badlands, eh?" Ferguson ejaculated. Then his weathered, smooth-shaven face wore its usual gravity. "Well, where can I find this Sheriff Slade? I'd like to talk to him about this anyway."

Henderson accommodatingly went to the porch and pointed out the office of the sheriff.

"Jeffs there. The front door's open."

Leaving the storekeeper with new food for thought, Adam Ferguson walked heavily across the street.

"Well," Henderson mused, "I wonder if that feller's on Burlson's trail? I wonder if I did right in selling Burlson guns and ammunition? Well, if he hadn't got 'em from me he'd got 'em from Dobbins yonder." He looked hard at the rival establishment and re-entered his store, conscience untroubled.

The sheriff, still unable to shake off thought of the humiliation and failure that had been his during the past few days, straightened in his chair as he heard somebody coming. By the time a stranger framed himself in the doorway Slade wore his most authoritative expression, even to having a hand on some papers that lay on the table where a moment before he had rested his boots in order that the back of his chair might be in position to serve as pillow.

"Howdy, sir, I am Adam Ferguson."

The fat sheriff recognized stability of character when he saw it. He scrambled to his feet.

"I'm Jeff Slade. Sheriff here," he informed as he held out a hand and had it gripped much too hard for a fat man's comfort. "Take that chair there, Mr. Ferguson."

The new-comer sat down, offered Slade a good cigar which was accepted. Ferguson lit a fresh one himself as the sheriff got his going.

"Just been listening to some of your citizens," remarked the caller. "I understand that a young fellow by the name of Burlson has been raising hell round here."

"That son-of-a-gun!" exploded the sheriff. His face purpled with wrath. "Raising hell is putting it plenty mild, if you ask me, stranger!"

In his disturbing thoughts Slade had been wishing for a sympathetic listener. He cooled a little now and began to talk. Within half an hour he had given much more than a synopsis of what Bill Burlson had done in the brief time he had been in San Ignacio.

"Must be a genuine heller," Ferguson suggested gravely.

"Heller? Why, the man's one of the worst desperadoes that ever hit this country!" Slade corrected, and wanted to confess how he had undergone the humiliating chapping at the hands of the three men he believed to be Burlson's confederates.

"Then why did you allow such a man to get away from here, Sheriff?"

Slade, trying to appear cool in order that his authority and importance might not suffer, explained that the desperado had got out of town before his real character had been suspected; that he himself with a posse had attempted to capture or kill the man during a wild chase from the headquarters of the I Cross Bar ranch.

"But I've not give up the job yet!" declared the sheriff as he laid a clenched fist on the table. "I've sent my under-sheriff after him! If there's a man in all the West who can track Burlson down and bring him in, dead or alive, it's Luke Longstreet!"

Ferguson's gravity returned, was even accentuated.

"You'd like the man dead or alive, eh?"

"Rather have him dead!" Slade snorted. "And it's more than likely if there's a gunfight Luke'll bring him back lashed across a saddle. Luke's a sure shot with a rifle, or with a pistol for that matter."

Concern showed on the sheriff's face as the visitor rose.

"What's your business, Mr. Ferguson?" he asked with forced coolness. "Maybe I can be of some help to you if you are——"

"I usually pay my bills, Sheriff," Ferguson answered quietly. "How far is it to the I Cross Bar ranch?"

"Less than fifteen miles. Come in again when you have the time, Mr. Ferguson."

"I'll be in to see you again before I leave this part of the country."

As the visitor walked slowly out Slade grimaced and growled:

"I wonder if he could be a range detective, or one of those Secret Service men from Wells Fargo? That Burlson has likely pulled a big job somewhere."

Within a few minutes Adam Ferguson had retrieved his valise from the hotel and got his rig from the stable. He turned the heads of his grey horses towards the I Cross Bar ranch, leaving nobody in San Ignacio with any definite information as to who he was or what he was doing.

CHAPTER XVIII

LUKE LONGSTREET did not have to look for trails. He had ridden the desert crossing many times, and to-day the winds did not whip cutting sand into the faces of horse and rider. Luke, too, knew how to make time on almost any sort of horse and at the same time spare the animal. It was therefore not long after one o'clock when he sighted the cottonwoods of the box canyon where he knew he would find water.

As he approached the street, however, his attention was diverted by one of the strangest things he had ever seen in his frontier career. He leaned forward, peered, rubbed the end of his nose, then his chin.

"Wal, dawggone," he muttered aloud. "This here's the first time I ever seen a saddle ridin' a pile of rocks."

Though it was a strange sight indeed, it did not make Luke forget that he and his horse were very thirsty. He rode into the wash, took the bit from the mouth of the animal and allowed it to drink. Luke drank from the other pool, and slapped the horse on the side of its nose.

"That's enough for right now. Take too much and it'll give you the bellyache. Let's see what that durned saddle means up there."

Bridling the horse, he led it to the grassy flat where Burlson had camped the previous night. Now as Luke approached the pile of rocks he discovered two things. One was that the pile had been recently made. The other was that it was of peculiarly oblong construction.

He was more interested in the saddle. It was not a good saddle nor was it a bad one. He saw some scratches upon the hard, smooth seat. He buckled until he sat on his haunches, then muttered that what he saw was writing, not mere scratches. Squinting, he read:

"This hombre put up an argument. Burlson."

Luke felt a little weak as he drew in a very deep breath of relief and gratitude. He had seen from the horse-tracks that Burlson had come this way.

"Why, the bob-tailed wildcat!" he mumbled as he chaffed his nose with a hard forefinger. "He must've been set on right here, and then he flops over and does the settin'."

Grateful as he was, Luke was not altogether certain of what he saw until he had read it again. Then he rose, looked about.

"Likely this here accounts for that lone hoss I seen headin' for the good grass on Pine Mountain," he soliloquized. "Why, that damned bob-tailed wildcat! He must've run into a fight. Wonder who it was he rubbed out?"

By no stretch of imagination was Luke sanguine or comfortable as he lifted the saddle off the pile of rocks. Practical jokes were practical jokes, and hoaxes were hoaxes. It was not above any outlaw or band of outlaws to perpetrate either.

"Now if they've gone and writ that there just to fool me, I'll kill every last durned man of 'em!" he promised as he bent to lift a rock. "This here ain't no joke to me. Hell! I sure hope it don't turn out to be Burlson!"

Luke wanted to shut his eyes and turn his head as he lifted off each stone. He had laid aside ten or twelve of them when he drew in a freer breath. The face he saw, bloody and dirst-smeared, was not that of the man he had met in San Ignacio. It was swarthy and lean and the hair above it was black, a little streaked with grey.

"The fightin' wildcat!" Luke muttered profoundly.

"Somebody jumped him and didn't jump fer enough. This here's one of the damned outlaws."

Horse-tracks had told Luke that the three desperadoes who had briefly terrorized San Ignacio had also come this way. He was certain they had set this man, now dead, to cover their trail with murderous ambuscade. Luke was certain on another point. Burlson had not turned back after the first fight in the badlands.

"Would have seen him and his bronc if he had. Couldn't've missed 'em back there on the open range."

He carefully replaced the rocks, set the saddle back on the cairn. He stood for a few minutes, gloomy and pondering, as he looked down at the improvised tomb.

"Wal, ride 'em!" he ordered, addressing the saddle. "Ride 'em high, wide and handsome! I got to ramble."

Now Luke was not so sanguine that Burlson had kept on. Back on the desert were many places where a rider could not have been seen, small buttes and ridges and patches of rocky ground. He was not again certain until he led his horse down the gravelly wash. There he saw tracks resembling the ones made by Burlson's horse. The tracks ascended the other side of the wash, kept to the trail ahead. Luke spurred out of the wash, stopped for perhaps a minute as his squinted eyes swept towering walls and grassy floor.

"The salty son-of-a-gun!" he muttered aloud. "I wonder what he figgered he was doin'? This here one he got was just like a wasp buzzin' wide round the edge. He'll run into the whole durned swarm if he don't watch out. Likely he's done it now."

To the lanky under-sheriff haste was now imperative. Until a little while ago he had counted upon overhauling Burlson by doing a little better riding, with more intimate knowledge of the trails. Before the outlaws had taken possession of the badlands Luke had thrice helped to take cattle through the winding canyon to the grassy range south of the Martaña Mountains.

Thus he could anticipate the physical features he would see as he rounded each bend of the canyon. He kept vigilant watch and rode with his carbine across the saddle in front of his thighs. He held his horse at a steady trot so he could cover the greatest distance without exhausting the animal.

Miles ahead in the sheer-walled canyon Burlson still failed to consider fight, but examined his whereabouts more closely. He had tucked his punctured hat into his waistband to prevent its making a possible target, and because of the heat that beat into the pass, sweat streamed from his face. He wiped it with a forearm as a bullet ricochetted off a rock and whined overhead.

He now discovered that the rocks at the easterly side of the barrier formed by the slips from the cliffs were smaller than those at the west. Furthermore, oxidization and attrition had put a little soil among them. In this soil scrub manzanita and chaparral had grown

Worming, crouching, he worked his way in among the rocks and brush until he was where he could see the grassy region to north. He found a spot with a rock at each rise and a rock in front, with a low bush overhead, where he could poke the barrel of his rifle through an opening and rest it in the red fork of a manzanita.

A slug spanged against one of the boulders beside the horse trail.

"Old Man Sharps again," Burlson decided, and set himself to locating the man who was using the long-range rifle.

The cliff beyond the flat was reddish colour, and fortunately Burlson discovered what looked like a grey, diaphanous ball floating diagonally upwards against it. He estimated the distance to the cliff at four hundred yards, and reasoned that the man with the Sharps was close against it, probably behind a boulder.

"Wish that jasper'd get in the open," he told himself. "I'd like to try this new gun at that range."

His attention was suddenly diverted by something moving nearby. He saw that the man who had jumped behind the big boulder at the edge of the rock jumble was edging away from it, probably hopeful because there had been no return fire for several minutes.

Inch by inch, then foot by foot the man came. He was a broad, squat fellow, roughly dressed and with heavy pistols sagging his belt at each hip. He kept a rifle steady in his hands. Burlson lifted a little on his elbows that he might turn the muzzle of his Winchester downwards.

"Guess I'd just as well dispose of him," he decided. "He carried this to me by blocking the trail."

As he took careful aim he was certain that the man below was one he had seen silhouetted briefly on the tall rim where he had been first fired upon from above.

"Damned bushwhacker!" he gritted as he squeezed trigger. "I think the whole outfit's nothing more than a bunch of bushwhackers!"

As Burlson's gun cracked the man dropped as if his sturdy legs had become hot jelly. He lay still. Burlson told himself grimly that another one was gone.

His shot had been fortunate that it had indeed disposed of a deadly foe, but it proved unfortunate, too. The little ball of black smoke that floated out from the brush revealed his approximate position, and before the smoke had begun to disintegrate in the hot air bullets were clipping the brush about him. Burlson risked them long enough to see that the man who had been with the horses was now safe in the small dry wash and that he was shooting fast and methodically. Then Burlson drew back until he could hear the lead whistling and sizzling about him and could feel the branches and cut twigs fall.

"Go ahead and use all your shells," he muttered. "You can't get me here, and I can get you if you have the guts to come out of that ditch."

Two minutes passed, with echoes of rifle-fire being buffeted from the cliffs. Burlson squirmed to a crack between two rocks.

Then something smote a point of wall at his right and a shower of lead fragments spattered down into the brush. He knew what this meant. If the man in the wash could not get him with direct bullets he might kill or wound him with swift-driven lead deflected from the cliff.

"Something like a scatter-gun," he mused grimly as little pieces of bullet stung his side and leg. Leaves fell.

Then a bullet cut a manzanita an inch in diameter and not a foot above Burlson's head. He knew, even before he dragged himself back to what looked like more safety, that the man with the big buffalo gun had somehow located the target.

"It looks," he decided, "like I'll find myself another place, muy pronto, if I've got much inside my head."

As he wormed quickly backwards big slugs ripped through the brush with whishing, snapping noises, and three

times showers of lead came down. Burlson wiped blood from a cheek where one lead splinter had found its target.

CHAPTER XIX

THERE was protection of a sort among the rock piles providing a man was willing to seek it. Such a course would enable Burlson's enemies to sneak up and renew the battle from close range. He considered letting them do this, shook his head.

"They'd likely wait till dark, or send for reinforcements."

He looked at his horse. The animal stood with ears pricked as if in concerned inquiry. It did not flinch as a bullet sprayed off the face of a cliff. Burlson saw now that Pete was in danger of being hit by a deflected bullet. He forgot the battle long enough to hurry down and lead the horse to better protection behind some larger boulders. Some of them, in fact, were as large as small houses.

Sneaking towards the little pass, Burlson crouched, then crawled as he neared the crest. For a few minutes he weighed the wisdom of showing himself in the open and inviting the fire of his enemies in the hope that he could dispose of them with a few shots.

"That would prove I was a damned fool," he muttered with a twisted smile. "Well, I've been told often enough that I am."

As he wormed his way towards the big rocks at the left of the horse trail, Burlson tried to guess the number of outlaws in this wild region. He had accounted for two. Two more were out there to the north. There was no telling how many men had travelled the trail, for it was marked with many horse-tracks going in both directions.

Burlson picked up the manzanita stick and placed his hat on its end again. Climbing almost to the summit of the rocks, he lifted it. The hat was no more than half in view from the other side when there was a spatter of a slug against a rock, followed by a tremendous boom. The hat was sprayed with lead fragments and blown backwards. Burlson had closed his eyes, and as he flinched aside he muttered:

"That son-of-a-gun with the Sharps is closer."

He squirmed to a place where he could peer between two

rocks. Nothing unusual met his gaze for a minute. Then he saw that there were two men in the wash not two hundred yards away.

"Old Man Sharps stole a march on me while I was down there taking care of Pete," he told himself wryly.

The men had lifted till their heads and shoulders showed. Bracing his feet, Burlson raised himself quickly and fired. As he did the rifles of his foes cracked. He flung his Winchester high but did not release grip on it as he dodged down. He heard a wild shout from the direction of the wash.

"Maybe they think they got me that time!"

The next minute it was evident that the outlaws were not certain of their victory, for they sprayed the rocks with lead, and sent some of it hissing overhead.

Burlson felt certain on one point. No booted man could steal up the opposite side of the rocky pass and do it silently. Then he had a disturbing thought. Perhaps other men were near, perhaps even now they were travelling wide in order to flank him. It was unreasonable to believe there had been a total of but four outlaws, since neither of the dead ones, and so far as he had been able to tell, neither of the very live ones in the wash, resembled any of the men who had tried to hold up the bank in San Ignacio.

Burlson decided that at least a part of the band was now riding back along the mesa by some perilous trail he had not discovered, in order that it might gain the floor of the canyon. Even now men might be in the canyon, riding hell-for-leather to come on him from behind.

Trying to ignore this possibility, Burlson sat down to wait, hopeful of making his enemies believe they had killed him at last. When they were convinced of this they would investigate.

"When they come I'll use the new six-shooters," Burlson promised himself, and smiled coolly. "I never did like a rifle at close range."

Never noted for patience, Burlson found each interval between shots longer and harder to bear. The intervals presently became actually longer, as if the men in the wash were merely using an occasional shot as a test.

The slanting sun beat fiercely upon cliffs and broken rocks. There was barely a breath of air stirring now. Burlson wiped sweat and grime and dried blood from his face.

His mouth was dry and hot. He put a small piece of twig in it and slightly promoted the flow of saliva.

"Gee whizz!" he grinned wryly. "I'd sure give a lot for a schooner of cold beer. Yeah, and I'd give more for a gallon of cold water. I must be a hell of a thing to look at." He smiled reminiscently and with some real pleasure. "I wonder what Katie'd think of me now? Love me?"

And while Burlson sweltered and fried in the heat far back in the winding box canyon, Luke Longstreet reined in sharply, for something like a slow pulse of air had met him face to face and there had seemed something akin to sound travelling with it.

Luke's doleful countenance became actually animated in its curiosity and eagerness. Then the far-off disturbance repeated itself, and Luke heard faint rumblings and echoings of sound along the high walls.

"Shootin'!" he muttered. "By golly, that son-of-a-gun has tangled with some more of 'em!"

Luke was long on patience if he was long on anything. At least he never did a thing until he was comparatively certain he should do it. Resting his weight in one stirrup, he absently rolled and lit a cigarette while his ears remained alert. Perhaps a minute passed before he was again disturbed. This time the rumble of dull sound that seemed to hug the walls was louder than the previous ones.

"That there ain't the gun I heard before," Luke declared with a picturesque oath. "That there makes a noise like some old buffalo rifle."

Luke waited no longer, but hit his horse with the rowels and forced the animal to its fastest trot.

"Maybe they got him trapped in them rock slides!" he told the horse. "That'd be a fust class place to trap a man."

The horse was still trotting when it came to where the mammoth, cliff-made horseshoe swung eastwards. Here there was no contradicting the nature of the echoes and reverberations that occasionally rushed down the canyon. It was now in shadow, and only a little strip of sunshine showed on the easterly cliffs.

"Durn it," Luke grumbled. "I never did see why that big mesa was put in the way. It ain't more'n half a mile across there at its neck."

A few miles ahead Bill Burlson was amazed at his own patience, yet he understood it was desperate, and somewhat controlled by fatigue and hunger. He considered going to the horse for a piece of jerky on which to gnaw, but decided that the salt in the dried beef would only increase his thirst.

Shadow was creeping in slowly, and Burlson spent minutes watching it crawl up a rock wall. Now he thought of something he had not previously considered, that the two men out in front had ridden for reinforcements before coming to discover whether or not they had killed him. "If that's the case I got to get out of here pronto," he told himself. "And damned if I'm going to hit the back trail. If I can get Pete across these rocks he and I can out-travel the best of them, if travelling has to be done."

Burlson leaned the rifle against a boulder where its barrel would be within reach as he climbed for a look. He had made only the first cautious step when he became tense, rigid almost. From the unseen side of the gap had come what certainly sounded like the slip of a boot off a rock.

With hard, supple muscles tense for action, Burlson waited, ears straining. He grimaced with disappointment. Then his face broke into a pleased grin.

"By gosh! Somebody is over there!"

He considered climbing until he could look, but decided that if he were seen it would probably mean the renewal of the siege. He waited until he was positive that at least one man was stealing up the rocky trail. Then he eased himself down, and disregarded the Winchester.

For once Burlson had momentary patience, for he looked at his new Colts to assure himself that they were loaded. Then with a weapon in each hand he crept along the side of the boulder that formed the westerly edge of the narrow horse trail. His blood-smeared face was set, yet it was alight with something akin to pleasure at the prospect of the fight being ended one way or the other.

Stopping as near the edge of the trail as he dared, Burlson waited and listened. Now the cautious footsteps of the man coming up the other side were more distinct. Another dragging minute went by. Then Burlson slid into the trail, rose to a standing crouch, with a six-shooter in each hand.

It had been a hot afternoon at the I Cross Bar ranch, in fact it had been hot all over the ranges. As the shadows lengthened Kate Ingalls sat on the ranch-house porch with her mother and father, and silently welcomed the coming of the evening breeze.

The sun had just left uppermost leaves of the cotton-wood trees beyond the last corral when round the grove spun a high-wheeled buggy drawn by a span of long-legged grey horses.

"Why, who is that?" cried Kate. "That rig doesn't belong in San Ignacio."

"Nor anywhere else in this part of the country," declared Pat Ingalls. "Not that I know of. The man's a stranger, too."

The greys were slowed, swung dexterously in before the porch, but not too near. The man in the buggy shoved back his broad black hat and mopped his forehead with a bandanna.

"Howdy," Ingalls said cordially.

"Howdy, sir," returned the new-comer. "Maybe I have the honour of addressing Mr. Pat Ingalls."

"Right in one respect," agreed the owner of the I Cross Bar as he rose, "but likely you're the first man that ever claimed it to be an honour. 'Light and rest that buggy seat, mister."

The stranger climbed out of the buggy, shook his broad shoulders as if the coat irked him. Kate looked keenly at the craggy face which once might have been handsome.

"I am Adam Ferguson," announced the visitor, smiling.

"Glad to know you, Ferguson." Ingalls reached out a hand made more cordial because he had immediately recognized in this man more than an ordinary cow waddy. The rancher presented his wife, then his daughter. As Ferguson held Kate's hand he eyed her critically and with apparent pleasure.

"By golly, Ingalls," he laughed, "you raise 'em pretty out here, don't you?"

"We do our best," Ingalls agreed while he watched his daughter colour with pleasure and embarrassment.

"Please don't flatter her, Mr. Ferguson," Mrs. Ingalls cautioned. "Sometimes she is bad enough without it."

Ferguson smiled at the girl, whose colour had visibly heightened.

"I don't believe she's so bad," he said. "Likely she has her share of temper, but I'll bet a hundred cattle she's a fine girl just the same."

"You'd lose your cattle, sir!" Kate cried, and was pleased. "Don't bet even one cow on me."

Mrs. Ingalls asked Ferguson whether he had eaten supper.

"I am sorry I have not, madam," he replied. "I heard news in San Ignacio that brought me here, and to be honest with you I did not take time to eat. May I bother you?"

On her feet now, Mrs. Ingalls assured him that supper would be no trouble.

"I'll go and tell the cook," she declared, and went inside.

Kate did not follow immediately, for she was held by the visitor's statement that he had heard news that had brought him here.

As for Ferguson, he seemed all business now, as he said brusquely:

"Mr. Ingalls, I'd like to have a private talk with you. Have you a place?"

The rancher led the way to a corner room of the adobe which he used as office. Kate had to be content with hurrying to help her mother, though she wanted to follow the men to hear what Ferguson had to say. She felt much flustered and worried, but could not decide why.

Perhaps half an hour passed before Ingalls and his guest came to the large, airy living-room, where they saw Kate framed in a doorway beyond which another lamp burned.

"Supper is ready for you, Mr. Ferguson," the girl said. "If you will just come in here——"

"It's not much," Mrs. Ingalls apologized as the visitor entered the dining-room. "Unfortunately there was not a great deal left from supper, and I did not want to delay you too long."

"If that is not much," Ferguson drawled as he looked at the table, "I'd like to know what a little is, madam."

Pat Ingalls did not enter the dining-room at once. He caught his daughter's hand and drew her into the other room.

She looked at him a little fearfully, yet her eyes were dilated by curiosity.

"' What is the matter, Dad? Is he——"

" I just wanted to tell you, Kate," her father whispered, " that he's here looking for Burlson."

" For Burlson?" she repeated, and the colour rushed from her face. " What does he want Burlson for? More crimes?"

Ingalls frowned, indicating the news he had was not pleasant to communicate.

" For quite a number of crimes, he tells me, Kate. You know, I'm kind of disappointed, because I'd formed quite a different opinion of that fellow Burlson."

" Well," she faltered, and took time to bite at her lower lip, " I guess he's plenty bad."

" Plenty bad!" agreed her father.

CHAPTER XX

As Burlson saw the rocky, crooked trail he beheld two men on it not forty yards distant. The one in the lead was big and burly. He wore a denim jumper that was too small, and his brush-raked overalls were of denim. He wore a cartridge-belt, but his six-shooter was in his right hand.

Burlson could not get a good view of the other man, except to note that he was considerably smaller and that he, too, had a pistol ready for action. He did know, however, that neither of these men was one of the three who had forced him to dance.

The men were evidently coming to make certain they had killed the lone intruder, or forced him to flee. They saw Burlson a split-second after he had sighted them. The man ahead roared:

" Hey! There's the——now!"

He was whipping up his weapon even before he had finished uttering the first word, but the new six-shooters at Burlson's hips were already spitting lead and fire and smoke.

The burly man crumpled as two bullets ripped through his broad chest. Over his sagging body Burlson saw the other

man, slender, almost youthful. There was amazement and reckless desperation on his ugly face. He ripped out an obscene curse as he jerked his big Colt upwards. Before he could press trigger another blast of swift death rode the air down over the rocks. The ugly man lurched, reeled to the right and fell with his head between two fragments of boulder. With the smoking guns in his hands Burlson stood looking at the two. Revulsion was stamped on his bloody face.

"Well, you came looking for it," he said grimly. "And if you'd found me first I wouldn't have stood any more chance than a snowball in hell."

He knew he was exposed to possible gunfire if there were other outlaws near, but did not move except to squat upon his haunches as he surveyed the grassy flat and the rocks. He watched until the last belt of sunlight left the cliffs and twilight began to touch the deeper depression.

Then he dragged the dead men from the trail and laid them in as smooth spots as he could find. He returned now to his horse, and felt weak and a little sick, yet not deterred from his resolution.

"Sorry I didn't loosen the cinch for you, Pete," he told the bay as he re-set the saddle. "Dry standing here, too, without water."

Getting some strips of jerky from the sack, Burlson swung to the saddle. It was good to feel the horse under him again. He munched slowly on the dried meat as Pete picked his way along the rocky trail. Burlson found he had to take his feet from the stirrups and raise them to the saddle to get safely between the boulders at the summit of the jumbled pass. Now the horse shied, snorted. Burlson patted its neck.

"Just a couple more who wanted to argue, Pete," he explained to the bay. "Don't it beat hell how some men want to argue?"

The horse carefully but skittishly picked its way past the dead men. Burlson breathed more easily when he felt the shod hooves on comparatively level going. He looked at the body of the man who had stolen from behind the big rock to find death.

"Five. I wonder how many there are left. I'm sure sorry I didn't find those three who furnish music for dancing."

Burlson took time now to rub the dried blood from his face. He discovered that the wound in his cheek was slight and had ceased to bleed.

He headed for the two saddled horses which still stood with reins down near the wash that had furnished breastwork for the outlaws. After looking about carefully in the gathering dusk he took the saddles and bridles off the animals.

He had already seen that the grassy level was hemmed to westwards by sheer cliffs where there was a long, steep slide. Doubtless it was down this slide that the men had come to intercept him at the pass that had been formed when thousands of tons of rock had crashed down from the cliffs.

Except for this slide, where a trail zizagged, there was but one negotiable outlet to the little valley, a steep-walled gorge at its east which was like the narrow neck of a decanter.

Burlson rode for this outlet, with the belief that if he followed it or one of its ramifications long enough he would eventually come to the headquarters of the outlaw band. He mused grimly, while he still chewed dried beef, that five of the band would not ride home to supper.

"Damn it!" he muttered. "I won't be satisfied till I've found the three that made me hoof it. I don't see why those five had to get in the way and stop my lead, but I suppose it's just about as well. They'd have had to be rounded up later."

Burlson found the gorge to be narrower than any he had so far travelled. In stretches its vertical walls were no more than forty feet apart. Stars already twinkled in the narrow stretch of sky above. The canyon was crooked and rough. As he rode into the gathering night Burlson realized that at any bend, any pile of rocks might be an ambush.

Though Luke continued to keep his horse at a fast trot, his hopes dwindled when he heard no rush of echoes and reverberations along the cliffs, no faint pulsations of air hitting him.

"The battle must likely be over," he told himself mournfully. "And if it is they sure got that son-of-a-gun."

Then Luke's despondency was blown away by a rush of sound between the precipices. He could not distinguish individual shots, but knew that the sounds had once been shots, two or more of them.

"Wal now! If that's him, he's sure up and kickin'."

He was trying to decide how many shots he had heard when the echoing and reverberating sound of another short salvo swept upon him.

As Luke dug the rowels into the sides of his horse he complained at the trail because it would not permit faster travel. The first stars were out when he realized he was nearing the barrier of broken and jumbled rock. He grinned when he remembered he had told himself this was the spot where Burlson might encounter trouble. He rode slowly, now, carbine in right hand and eyes vigilant. If the battle was over and the outlaws had won——

"Wal, I done come this far and I sure ain't goin' back without seein' what happened, hoss."

Near some huge boulders he found where a horse had stood for a considerable time. He leaned down.

"Hoss was rid away," he decided with momentary hope. "But then o' course the damned outlaws could've done that. That bay was a hoss any man'd like to fork."

Luke stuck his carbine back into its boot and dismounted. He took his bridle-reins in left hand, while he held a six-shooter in the right. He was prepared to shoot at the first moving thing he saw, but knew he would not, since that thing might be the man he wanted to overtake.

"I gotta let him know I'm here," he mused. "He might be lyin' round here daid."

Slouchy, so slow that time was apparently of no consequence in his life, Luke picked his way, meanwhile whistling "Home Sweet Home" so mournfully that the cooling cliffs all but wept.

"You know, Luke," he told himself, "you orter learn you a sprightlier song'n that. Besides, you ain't got no home, that is not much of a one."

He was trying to remember another tune when his horse shied and snorted, almost jerking the reins from his hand. Luke turned, still in no hurry.

"Now just what's the matter with you?"

He saw the direction in which the horse's ears and nose were pointed, and looked. He dropped the reins while something cold and sickening filled his heart.

"I was scared they'd prove too many for him, hoss."

Luke picked his way among rocks and stunted brush. His cold sickness became worse as he made out the horribly

crushed body of a man. He shook his head, then lifted it to peer at the high rim almost directly above. He moved his head so his eyes could describe a circle, and the cold sickness fled from his heart.

"Wal, now!" he muttered. "He must've shot that feller on the fly. I wonder if he was tryin' to jump from one cliff to the other up there? It's durned queer, 'cause I never seen bullets break up a man that away. Wal, I wouldn't put it past Burlson bein' able to hit a man on the fly, at fair range."

While Luke's heart was light, it received another chilling jolt after he had led his horse between the boulders at the summit of the low pass. Here the animal snorted and shied again, and peering through the gloom the under-sheriff traced the forms of two dead men beside the treacherous trail.

"Aw, my Gawd!" he groaned. "He got one of 'em and one of 'em got him! You stay here, hoss, while I see which one done the best shootin'."

Luke's heart was like lead as he bent over the first corpse, but it lightened until he might have soared over the cliffs when he looked at the second. He actually grinned as he absently tickled his nose with a forefinger.

"The fightin' bob-tailed wildcat!" he chuckled. "If he didn't fight his way out of it here, too! But I still can't figger how he got that feller back yonder on the fly."

"The fightin' bob-tailed wildcat!" he chuckled. "If he didn't fight his way out of it here, too! But I still can't figger how he got that feller back yonder on he fly."

Much as he wanted to find Burlson, Luke's experience forbade that he shout or fire a friendly shot. Many shots had already been fired, and since sound did vague and unnatural things here among the box canyons and mesas, he knew that the sounds might have carried to the hang-out of the outlaws.

Knowing the one outlet from the rock-walled valley, and believing that Burlson might not have discovered it, Luke began a slow exploration of the flat, always with six-shooter ready. Presently he found two loose horses towards the westerly end of the level, and managed to ride close enough to one to see, in the gloom, that it had recently worn a saddle.

"It's a wonder the bob-tailed wildcat didn't steal 'em," he chuckled. "One of 'em's a fair nag."

Two horses recently unsaddled demanded further investigation. Luke used up the remainder of an hour before he discovered the saddles.

"Durned funny," he soliloquized as he looked down at the saddles, dim through the darkness. "He sure is the damnedest feller to leave saddles layin' round loose."

Luke sat his own saddle, listening. He heard only the eerie moaning of the night wind among the crannies and grottoes of the cliffs. He dismounted, squatted to his haunches. He ran fingers over the hard, smooth seat of one of the saddles, then the other. He decided that the seat of the second seemed a little rough, as if it had been scratched with something sharp. He risked a match, and by its light read:

"A few more of 'em wanted to argue. Burlson."

Here was a ponderous problem, and one admitting of no swift solution in Luke's brain.

"Uh-huh," he remarked at last. "There ain't no man as can write messages on a saddle with the point of a knife unless he's either a ghost or plumb alive. And I'm bettin' dollars to dog-hair Burlson ain't no ghost yet."

CHAPTER XXI

FILLED with fatigue and with lips cracked and tongue beginning to swell, Burlson pushed on, spurred by indomitable courage and resolution. Above him the stars glittered in a belt that conformed to the winding rims. The darkness of the canyon was stygian, and he allowed the horse to find its own way. He could feel from the touch of its hooves that it was following a trail.

They had travelled what he estimated at two miles when the gait of the bay quickened and Burlson could feel it tremble under him as if with eager anticipation. He drew the reins tight so the horse would make as little noise as possible on the rocky ground. The bay strained at the bit and Burlson could dimly discern that its ears were pricked and its nose straight out.

He did not try to guide Pete, and a few minutes after the first quickening of gait the horse slid down a bank into a wash. Burlson caught the reflection of stars.

"Water!" he cried softly and with profound gratitude.

Dismounting, he took the bit from Pete's mouth and stood controlling his own thirst while the animal drank.

"That'll be mucho for now, amigo," he decided, and rebridled the bay.

Burlson drank in moderation, though he would have liked nothing better than to have stayed here all night, drinking at frequent intervals. He washed the dried blood and dirt from his face and head, felt the stimulation of water and cleanliness.

"I must still be a hell of a looking thing," he grinned wryly. "I wonder if Kate still loves me as much as she did. Nice little girl, Katie."

Burlson did not have to curb his impatience now, for he had no actual hope of finding the hang-out of the outlaws before daylight. He planned that like an Indian he would attack with the dawn.

"Surprise 'em while they're still asleep."

He ate some jerky, some dry crackers, then gnawed upon a piece of raw bacon while he wished for hot coffee. Still the cool water with which he washed down the food was good.

He readjusted the saddle, allowed the bay to drink again.

"Might as well be ramblin' along, Peter."

A few times Burlson dismounted and led the horse where the trail was unusually rocky. Thus he was able to minimize noise and at the same time be better prepared against surprise. He wished he had eyes like a cat.

As he travelled the walls towered ominously at each side. Never for long stretches were their lines straight. He had gone less than two miles from the water-hole when he saw that the cliffs flared ahead, allowing view of a broader belt of star-studded sky.

He reined in, leaned tensely forward over the horn of the saddle. His eyes tried to tell him that just ahead the darkness seemed to be accentuated by the existence of flat land, though a few hundred yards away a tall precipice put a flat line against the stars.

Burlson concluded that he was coming into a small valley not unlike that where he had loosed the two horses and scratched his cryptic message on a saddle. He rode for a

hundred yards and stopped, certain now he was on the edge of a grassy flat.

"Think this place is worth investigating," he decided.

Dismounting, he felt dry grass underfoot even before he had led the horse from the trail. Here the ground was almost level.

"This wouldn't be a bad place for a hang-out," he informed Pete softly. "The way those bluffs look it'd take quite an army to get a pack of mal hombres out of here. Well, it's worth investigating."

At his right jutted a point of cliff that seemed two thousand feet high. Leading the horse, Burlson made for it, determined to circle the little valley from the right. He had barely rounded the tip of a point when he stopped as if from some peremptory command.

The cliff turned southwards, then eastwards, then northwards, forming a cove. In the middle of this cove, against the towering wall, shone two areas of light, as if made by two candles. They were roughly rectangular, and one was much smaller than the other.

"So!" Burlson muttered as a cool, yet pleased grin twitched the muscles of his face. "We're here at last."

At the moment he had seen the lighted areas he had known they were a door and a window of some sort of cabin.

"Now this is a lot better than I expected," he mused. "No use to wait for daylight now, because I'm not afraid of departed spirits like an Injun."

Cautiously, slowly, he led the bay horse back round the point of the cliff. Here he dropped the romal of the bridle, and drew the long Winchester from its scabbard.

"Gun," he addressed the rifle, "you're a little clumsy for close quarters, but I'll take you along just the same."

He sat down on the grass and removed his shoes. He wriggled his toes pleasurably inside his socks. He wrinkled his nose.

"Gee-whizz," he grinned, "they're almost as bad as Luke Longstreet's feet. That was the only thing I didn't like about Luke—his smelly feet. Well, maybe both of us should change socks."

Burlson followed the wall, keeping as close to it as the debris from the cliff permitted. He flinched from uneven ground, from rocks. He cursed softly, sat down."

"Damned cholla cactus! I might have known they would be here!"

He wished for the shoes he had left near his horse while he tried to pick thorns from a foot.

After a few minutes he resumed his stalking, with rifle in left hand, six-shooter in right, and not losing sight of the two areas of yellowish light.

Presently he heard the mumble of voices, and discovered that shadows moved in the light. He made out a corral, three-sided, with the face of the cliff for its fourth boundary. He was grateful when closer investigation proved the corral to be empty.

"Got their bronc out on grass. Hell, I sure hope it's the three that made me hoof it against my will. Well, we'll soon find out."

When he was a little nearer Burlson could make out individual voices. They sounded like the voices of men who were in good humour, though perhaps recently tired. Burlson's countenance brightened.

"Sound like the same three all right. It'd be like them to come on here and send somebody else back to bushwhack me."

He flinched many more times because of rocks and sticks before he reached the wall of the cabin. Even in the dark he could see that the shack was constructed against the face of the cliff. With a hand he felt that the walls were made of rocks and dried mud. The window was very near. From it came voices that clamped Burlson's jaw and made his eyes cold.

"The three that made me hoof it!" he gritted, and suddenly it occurred to him that the cabin might contain more than three men. Others might be asleep or sprawled upon bunks while they listened to the talk of the three who had visited San Ignacio. "Had a fine time, didn't you?" Burlson muttered. He bent and noiselessly laid the Winchester on the ground.

He did not draw his left six-shooter until he had cautiously peered through the glassless opening at an angle. Three were inside, Jackling, Tobin, Arkett. They were seated at a home-made table on which were dirty dishes and the scant remains of a meal. A bottle with a little whisky in it stood beside a burning candle. The lower end of the candle

was stuck into the neck of a bottle from which all the whisky had been drained.

"Damned if that jasper couldn't dance!" laughed Arkett suddenly. "I'd sure like to have him to furnish music for again, fellers."

"You won't get him," growled Jackling. "I expected we'd be followed, specially after that fight with the posse, but I sure didn't expect it'd be him."

"Well, the boys have seen to it that he's had his last dance long before now," grinned Tobin evilly. "Served him damned well right for hornin' in."

"But are we sure it was him?" Arkett objected.

"Hell," Jackling cursed, "Domingo said it was him. He had the glasses."

Burlson's quick brain supplied the remainder of the ruthless picture. The first man he had had to kill was Domingo. He had been left to guard the pass after he had met the three there. He had watched the desert through some sort of glass and had seen but one rider heading towards the badlands. Possibly, yes probably, he had returned to the three waiting outlaws with the news and they had travelled towards their headquarters, sanguine in the belief that Domingo would easily ambush the lone rider.

"Well, by hell, it's sure time some of the other boys was showin' up," growled Tobin.

"Oh, they'll be here all right," declared Jackling. "If you fellers ain't goin' to empty that bottle, I am."

Burlson realized now that everything had not been entrusted to Domingo. After they had reached the cabin the three had sent out other men to watch from the rims, some to wait in the rocky little pass where he had spent so many hot, weary, hazardous hours.

"Thorough hombres," he mused contemptuously as he lifted the second Colt from its leather.

He crouched as he passed the window, but was at his full height as he stepped into the doorway, a pistol steady at each hip. His cold and squinted eyes saw the amazement that flashed to Tobin's face as he was the one who had view of the doorway.

"Hell!" the outlaw cried. "Where'd you come from?"

"Not from where you three are going if you don't grab your ears!" snarled Burlson as he moved into the room, seeing

from the tail of an eye, and with vast satisfaction, that it contained only three men.

Arkett and Jackling had turned on their stools when they had seen the look of amazement on Tobin's face. Arkett, who was the only one armed, grabbed for a gun.

"Don't!" snarled Burlson. "I can blow all three of you to hell before any of you can draw."

Arkett let the Colt slip back into its holster.

"Get your hands up, you coyotes! Grab your ears!" Burlson ordered. "From what I just heard you three sure figure yourselves three curly wolves."

"But how the hell did you get here?" Jackling protested as he lifted his big arms. "You ain't no damned ghost."

"No ghost," gritted Burlson. "But some of the mal hombres you left to turn me into one are ghosts themselves now. Yeah, all of them, I reckon. Shuck that belt and gun, feller, and do it the way I say!"

Arkett unbuckled his belt, allowed it and the holstered weapon to fall to the dirt floor.

"Now get over there, all of you, and take a long look at that wall!" ordered Burlson crisply. "I want to decide just where to make you three dance."

Cursing and growling, the outlaws faced the rough wall. Tobin turned his head.

"You ain't goin' to kill us now, amigo?" he asked, and grinned recklessly.

"Not just now, paisano. I want to see how light you three can be on the hoof while I supply the music."

Luke Longstreet seldom suffered from impatience, but to-night he felt the necessity for haste. It was dragging at him as if it were a cable wound swiftly at its far end, which, to Luke's mind, was where Burlson was.

"Durn that bob-tailed wildcat!" he muttered as his horse trotted along the trail in the blackness. "I wish he'd waited for me. Dawg-gone, why didn't I tell him to wait?"

Luke's state of mind was such that he disregarded caution, though he rode with a six-shooter in right hand. He slackened pace, however, as he came to the flaring mouth of a box canyon, this because he knew there was a rock cabin a short distance ahead, a cabin that he himself had used with other

cowboys when, years ago, they had driven cattle to and from the San Ignacio region and the ranges south of the Martaña Mountains.

"Now that son-of-a-gun just might have found that shack in the dark," Luke decided. "Seems he can do most anything. I'll just take a quiet look-see."

He had not ridden much farther when the friendly whicker of a horse came from the black silence. Before Luke could lean forward and grab the nose of his own horse that animal loosened an answering whinny.

"Durn the luck! Now if that cabins happens to be used by them durned outlaws, the jig's up! Always did wish I had a deef and dumb hoss!"

CHAPTER XXII

LUKE had ridden too many years, and to-day too far, to take off his boots and walk. He had made previous investigations on horseback and could make this one, even if it should include a little shooting. He gripped his six-shooter.

"That hombre might have let his hoss whicker jest to get a good look at me."

Presently he could dimly discern an object against the black of the cliff. It looked like a horse, provided imagination was stretched.

"Now durned if it mightn't be a loose hoss!" he soliloquized.

Luke did not want to call a challenge any more than he wanted to shoot. Reluctantly he dismounted and dropped the ends of his reins. Then he stole to the right where, by lying on the ground, he could see the horse outlined against the star-studded sky. He grinned.

"That bronc's got a saddle on, and from the size of him he sure looks like the big bay that bob-tailed wildcat rode."

Luke guessed he had no immediate need for his own horse.

"They may decide to do a little visitin' and rub noses," he went on. "That won't do no harm. Durn it, I wonder what's become of Burlson if that's his hoss."

With carbine in crook of left arm, and with six-shooter handy, Luke rounded the point of cliff. He stopped when he saw the rectangles of light in the dark cove. A chill of premonition and fear made him shiver. He rubbed the end of his nose.

"Durned funny. Out here men don't usual stay up this late. There must be somethin' to keep 'em up."

He felt a little sick as he thought that after all Burlson might possibly be one of the outlaws, but this sensation was brief.

"Nope, that son-of-a-gun wouldn't have fought his way in here like he done if he was one of that outfit!" Luke rubbed his nose vigorously and his face wrinkled in perplexity. "Now I wonder how he managed to shoot that hombre back there on the fly? That ornery maverick sure didn't have wings."

To Luke there was a probable explanation of the light in the rock cabin at this late hour. The bandits could have Burlson captive.

"Yeah, he might have been just durned fool enough to walk into one of their traps. But I dunno. He done purty good so far."

With characteristic courage Luke decided that if Burlson were in a trap, captive, he was going to do his utmost to get him out.

He did not skirt the cliff, but struck across the open. He walked as carefully as he could, and still carried the six-shooter in his right hand. He had covered two-thirds of the distance from the point of the cliff to the cabin when he stopped. He had heard voices, or rather one voice. Then he heard a laugh which even here amid the lonely, eerie cliffs sounded mirthful.

"By golly, that sure sounded like him! I wonder if he is one of 'em after all? If he is I'll sure be a heap disappointed. Yeah, just about as much disappointed as I'll be riled."

Luke remembered that he was under-sheriff of San Ignacio and therefore an officer of the law whose sworn duty it was to take outlaws dead or alive.

"Wal, if that son-of-a-gun has up and fooled me, I'll sure rub his nose in the dust!"

Grim and resolute, yet cautious, Luke advanced and at

the same time sidled to the left. He stopped when he came to where he could see through the open doorway.

Inside, at a table, sat Burlson. The lighted candle showed him plainly, showed the six-shooter at his elbow. His hair was tousled and matted with dry blood.

"Now I wonder what this here means? He's takin' to somebody."

Luke decided he would do better work at close range with his pistols. He laid his carbine on the ground and drew a second Colt.

Advancing a little more, he sidled still farther to the left to a point where he could look obliquely through the doorway. Here he stood still, an incredulous expression on his wrinkled, loose-skinned face. Presently he rubbed the bridge of his nose with the sight of the forty-four he held in his left hand.

"So that there, she explains it all," he muttered. "Why, the bob-tailed wildcat! Luke, you durned fool, you orten't to had them suspicions about him. Durned if he ain't all right.

Luke's problem now was to make his presence known without being shot. He squatted on his haunches and began to sing "Home Sweet Home," and his slow, doleful, tuneless voice would have made the black cliff weep in sympathy. It did make Burlson jerk his head about and tense. The revolver on the table seemed to jump into his hand. Then he erased himself as a target by jumping against the wall between door and window.

"'Mid pul-easures and pal-aces,
Wh-ere ev-er I may roooam,"

Luke sang funereally.

"Say! Who thinks he's singin' out there?" came a command from the cabin.

"Don't you reckonize this here voice, amigo?" came the answer from the singer.

There was a long moment of silence broken a little by what sounded like incredulous but hopeful butterings.

"Gee-whizz! Is that you, Luke? I don't believe there is another voice like that anywhere!"

"Wal, it was me the last time I heard from myself," drawled Luke. "Want me to warble some more?"

"No! For gosh sakes, no!" laughed Burlson. "You've got us all weeping already."

"Who's the rest of us all?" Luke drawled. "I'd sure like to warble some more."

"Just some friends of mine," replied Burlson. "They'll all be dee-lighted to see you, Luke. They're awful lonesome."

Luke managed to put the habitual expression of dolefulness over his face as he stepped into the light, though he wanted to utter a yip and slap Burlson on the back for sheer happiness.

Apparently ignoring the man he had come to help, he looked without interest at the end of the cabin. There against the rocks sat three hard-bitten men, trussed hand and foot.

"They been bad leetle boys? That why you're treatin' 'em this away?" The lanky under-sheriff holstered his pistols and grinned doubtfully.

"Those three," answered Burlson without a smile, "are the hombres who made me dance to their music in San Ignacio."

"Do tell!" muttered Luke. "And 'cause of that you ketched 'em and tied 'em up?"

"You didn't chap 'em, did you, Bill?" Luke drawled, and rubbed his chin dolorously.

The prisoners cursed him, advising him where he could go to find a superabundance of heat.

"Me," drawled Luke, "I ain't cold."

"Look here, you long-legged polecat!" Jackling exploded. "This here——has been tellin' us as how he got five of my men on the way in! He's a damned liar! There ain't a man in the world that could ride through those badlands and get five good men that was out there to get him!"

Luke chafed his chin again, shook his head.

"Wal, I done counted four. He might've got another one, I reckon." He turned to Burlson. "Say, Bill, how the hell'd you shoot that hombre on the fly, the one just the other side of that place where you have to climb through the rocks? You gotta learn me that way of shootin'!"

Burlson explained that he had shot the man from the high rim. Luke looked disappointed.

"You didn't shoot him on the fly, Bill?"

"No, he was on the rim shooting down at me when I accidentally plugged him."

Luke wagged his head and grimaced.

"Aw, I'm sorry aboot that. All the way from there I been hopin' you hit him on the fly so's you could learn me that way of shootin'."

The under-sheriff looked mournfully at the tall, lean man he had come to find. The lines of weariness, pain and nervous exhaustion did not mask the grim determination on Bill Burlson's face.

"You sure must've had one hell of a time, feller."

"It wasn't so bad," said Burlson. "I'm mighty glad you showed up, Luke. I didn't know you wanted to come."

"Wall," Luke drawled, and hesitated, "I didn't just know it at the time neither."

At the headquarters of the I Cross Bar Kate Ingalls had watched Adam Ferguson's restlessness for two days. She had watched the lines of anxiety and worry deepen upon his weathered face. A dozen times she had asked her father why Ferguson did not go after Burlson if he wanted him so bad, and each time Pat Ingalls had said soberly:

"We figure that if there's a man in this country who can find him it's Luke Longstreet, Kate."

"But Luke may get tangled up with the outlaws and get killed himself."

A score of times Kate was tempted to ask Adam Ferguson why he did not go and take a bunch of I Cross Bar riders with him, but she could not quite bring herself to do so because of the apparent anguish and pain in the visitor's eyes.

"I reckon we'd best start out to look for 'em," Ingalls said at the end of the second day when he, his family and the guest were at supper in the ranch-house.

"Yes," agreed Ferguson, "I'll have to do something. Can't stand this any longer."

"We'll take along a dozen of my cowboys," said the rancher. "After all, Luke might have ridden into trouble."

"Yes, and Burlson might have ridden into trouble too!"

"But Burlson is an outlaw, Kate!" Mrs. Ingalls reminded.

Kate looked at her plate. She lifted her head when Ferguson spoke.

"Don't be too tender-hearted, Miss Ingalls. If a man goes outside the law it's his own fault ninety-nine times out of a hundred."

"Yes," the girl agreed, and tried to read the visitor's face.

Supper was almost finished when the four at the table jumped from their chairs as a gun exploded in the front yard.

"What's that?" Kate cried, and before anybody could answer other reports came.

"My God! There's a gunfight out there!" Ingalls muttered.

CHAPTER XXIII

KATE led the hurrying procession towards the front of the ranch-house, but as she slid to the now shadowy porch she stopped aghast. She clapped her hands to her ears, for there in the front yard stood Burlson, grim and haggard, while he put bullets within inches of the feet of three men who danced furiously and with fright upon their hard-bitten faces.

"Dance, you damned skunks!" Burlson snarled. "Here, Luke, give me that pistol!"

Luke Longstreet handed him a loaded revolver which was emptied at the swiftly-moving feet of the three men. I Cross Bar cowboys streamed from the cookhouse, yelling and shouting questions.

Now a vague little smile was upon Kate's lips and she took her hands from her ears. She glanced at Adam Ferguson as he hurried past her, and saw that the lines of anguish and worry were gone from his face. She saw him grasp Burlson's arm, try to draw him back.

"Keep out of this!" warned Burlson. "I'll talk to you after a while. These hombres ain't near through."

She was amazed at the manner in which Adam Ferguson moved back, amazed, too, at the broad smile upon his face. She clutched at his arm.

"Isn't—isn't he an outlaw?" she shouted to make herself heard above the din of exploding cartridges.

"Watch out, Bill!" Ferguson yipped. "You durned near hit that feller's toes!"

Luke was reloading guns with swiftness nobody had ever before seen him demonstrate. Cowboys were yelling and laughing. One shouted:

"Say! Them three must be the same ones that made that jasper hoof it in San Ignacio!"

"They are!" yipped Ben James. "Hell, he sure is makin' 'em dance like they done him!"

Kate wondered whether she were beginning to understand. Burlson moved back, a smoking six-shooter in each hand. Jackling, Tobin and Arkett ceased their wild dancing and looked tired enough to drop in their tracks.

"That'll do, with interest," said Burlson. He turned to Luke. "They're yours now. Got the cuffs?"

From an overalls pocket Luke produced the handcuffs, which he snapped on the wrists of the badlands outlaws. He looked at the foreman of the I Cross Bar.

"You take keer of 'em for me for a while," he ordered. "Feed 'em, but don't waste good grub on 'em."

Still bewildered, Kate watched the foreman and some of the cowboys lead the prisoners away. Then she was aware that Burlson and Adam Ferguson were walking towards the porch, on the edge of which she sat tense and trembling.

"I want you to get better acquainted with my son Bill," the older man said soberly.

Kate looked at the younger man's eyes and saw again the reckless and indomitable spirit. She tried to keep her colour down.

"I'm glad to meet you, Bill Ferguson."

"Bill Burlson," corrected the man who had claimed to be Adam Ferguson. "I'm Tom Burlson, of the Lazy B outfit on the San Gregorio."

"Well, how are you, Katie?" Bill Burlson drawled, and grinned as he looked at her.

"Oh—I'm—I'm well," she faltered.

"Looky here, Pat," Luke Longstreet was saying, "this here bob-tailed wildcat sure cleans them outlaws out of the badlands. From now on it'll be just as safe as it used to be to take cattle through to the Martañas. Nope! No siree! I didn't do a durned thing 'cept to help him fetch 'em in, and he could've done that alone just as good except for havin' somebody to chin with. That bob-tailed wildcat done it all hisself, Pat."

Ingalls looked at Bill Burlson, who stood tall, a little aloof, obviously caring little what was said.

"I figured the minute I saw him he was quite a man, Luke."

"Wal," the under-sheriff rubbed his long nose, "it's a good thing you didn't copper that there bet, Pat."

"I didn't," declared the owner of the I Cross Bar as he continued to appraise Bill Burlson. "I played him to win from the start, though of course I figured you'd be of some help to him. He sure made them hombres hoof it, didn't he?"

Luke rubbed his chin and grinned.

"Wal, now, mebbe he did," he drawled. "I didn't notice it, I was so durned busy loadin' guns. I recollect though that on the way in from the badlands he mentioned somethin' about how he was likely goin' to make them three fling their feet a little faster'n they'd made him fling his in town."

They trooped into the house, where Kate was puzzled as she listened to the story, most of which was told drolly by Luke. It was not until an hour after the lengthy meal was over that she found opportunity to ask Tom Burlson why he had been so anxious to find his son, and particularly why he had left the impression that Bill was an outlaw.

"Well, he's mighty near been one," Burlson exploded, then tried to calm himself. "Say, that boy has done almost everything short of robbing and murdering! I got mighty tired of putting up with his escapades and continually digging up money for him, so I up and kicked him in the seat of the of the britches and told him to start out and shift for himself."

"And then," she prompted—"then you got ashamed and came to find him."

"Not ashamed, he denied stubbornly. "But me and his mother figured I should come and look after him."

"And kick him in the seat of the britches again?" she laughed.

"Huh! He don't need it!" he declared proudly. "And he don't need any takin' care of either. He sure showed it this time. I tell you, he did more than ten men's work in cleaning out the outlaws from your badlands. Oh, yes, even down on the San Gregorio we know what a time

the I Cross Bar and the adjacent ranchers have had with that badlands outfit."

"Yes," Kate admitted as she watched Bill Burlson, who was standing in the light from the bunk-house doorway, talking with several men, "I'd say he'd done at least one man's work."

"One? He's done the work of ten men, Miss Ingalls! Why, the fool, he might have been killed!"

Kate was not yet satisfied.

"But why did he do it, Mr. Burlson? It couldn't have been just because those three made him dance. Or it couldn't have been because he was desperate or angry with you and took that reckless way of showing you he could do something worth while."

He laid a fatherly hand upon her shoulder.

"You let him tell you about that, Kate. I think likely he can do it better than I can."

Kate had no opportunity to question Bill Burlson that night. Nor did she find him in the morning. When she dressed carefully and went to the porch she learned that he and ten I Cross Bar riders were already on their way to the badlands to bury the dead outlaws and to see if any had possibly escaped Burlson's sanguinary ride through the box canyon.

"They'll be back in three or four days," said Tom Burlson. "I've accepted the invitation of your folk to stay here and visit with them till then. Likely I'll want to get better acquainted with you, Kate."

"You'll know too much about me in three or four days," she laughed, and her cheeks grew prettily pink.

In San Ignacio Sheriff Jeff Slade blustered about until he learned that the three prisoners Luke had brought in had really been captured by Burlson, and that that reckless and intrepid young man had left five more out there and in no condition to fill any of the cells in his jail.

"Wal," Luke drawled, "he went after them three 'cause they made him dance against his will. You had the same right to go into the badlands after 'em 'cause they done spanked the seat of your britches with a pair of chaps, Jeff."

Slade turned purple with rage, then he paled and his fat muscles sagged.

"Damn it, Luke! I'm goin' to resign this office."

"Good idee," grunted Luke. "Jeff, you never was cut out for a sheriff in the fust place, and in the second you're too durned fat. In your case the fat sort of iled up the sand so's the sand ain't much gritty. I sorter been figgerin' on this here job of yourn for quite a spell. It's sure a fine job fer a lazy man, 'specially after them outlaws have been cleaned out of the badlands."

At the I Cross Bar Kate Ingalls waited through three long days, and a fourth. About mid-afternoon Burlson and the cowboys returned. One look at his grim, weary face told her they had done some sort of unpleasant job well.

It was not until the heat of the afternoon was giving way to the cool of evening that she found herself alone with him in the main room of the adobe ranch-house.

"Won't you tell me," she asked, "just why you risked your life to go into the badlands after those outlaws? It couldn't have been just because your father—well—kicked you off the ranch."

Burlson's brows drew down and under them his eyes chilled.

"Now look here, Katie," he warned, "don't you go faulting my father! If ever a boy needed the run it was me. I hadn't been worth a damn."

She told him, a little breathlessly, that she had not been faulting his father, that she had only wanted to know why he had taken such desperate and reckless chances.

"You could have gone anywhere, done almost anything and made good.

He looked soberly at her. When his smile came it was bent.

"I'll tell you," he said with apparent reluctance. "One of those outlaws killed my best friend, Joe Denny, down at San Gregorio. I heard he was somewhere in the badlands, so I made him by first job."

"Which one?" she faltered. "Was he one of the three you brought in?"

Burlson shook his head.

"No, he was Buck Sorenson. We buried him the day before yesterday out in the rocky canyon. You know where all that rock has tumbled from the cliffs?"

"Yes I know. I was through that canyon once. That was before the outlaws took possession."

Suddenly Kate found that her wrists were held firmly in his big hands. There was warmth in his eyes now, yet with it was resolution.

"Katie, I'm on my way up, and from now on hell and high water can't make me a fool again!"

"Well," she faltered. "That's good. I hope—I mean I think——"

"Never mind!" he broke in. "Katie, you're going to marry me."

"Marry you?"

"Yes, that's what I said. Marry me. If you don't——"

"I suppose you'll just mope yourself to death," she finished.

"I guess not!" He laughed happily, then was serious again. "Katie, if you don't marry me you'll lose the best chance you ever had to get a man for a husband. How about it? Once I make up my mind I settle things pronto."

She felt now that there was tenderness in the iron grip on her wrists. Her eyes misted and she felt her lips tremble.

"We'll see about that, Bill Burlson," she laughed, but she did not resist when he drew her towards him. In his arms she looked up. "I don't know what I can do about it, Bill."

"There's nothing either of us can do," he told her as he looked into her misted eyes. "It's all done but what the preacher'll have to say, Katie."

THE END

WHITE CIRCLE NOVELS

LIST OF TITLES AVAILABLE

WESTERNS

OUTLAW OF CLOVER CREEK	MASON MACRAE
FLOOD WATER	LUKE SHORT
COWBOY, SAY YOUR PRAYERS	WILL ERMINE
GUN FEUD	E. B MANN
LITTLE RIVER VALLEY	J. E. GRINSTEAD
HURRICANE RANGE	LUKE SHORT
RIDER OF THE MIDNIGHT RANGE	WILL ERMINE
TROUBLED RANGE	E. B. MANN
TEXAS TRIGGERS	EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

WHITE CIRCLE NOVELS

LIST OF TITLES AVAILABLE

CRIME CLUB

TEN LITTLE NIGGERS	AGATHA CHRISTIE
SWEET POISON	RUPERT PENNY
THE NATION'S MISSING GUEST	HULBERT FOOTNER
GREEK TRAGEDY	G. D. H. & M. COLE
DEATH AT DYKE'S CORNER	E C R LORAC
THE CHIFFON SCARF	M. G. EBERHART
SAD CYPRESS	AGATHA CHRISTIE
MYSTERY OF THE SMILING DOLL	HENRY HOLT
MURDER IN THE COALHOLE	MILES BURTON
DEATH AT THE BAR	NGAIO MARSH
DEATH ON THE BOAT TRAIN	JOHN RHODE
DEAR DEAD WOMAN	ANTHONY GILBERT
AUNT SUNDAY SEES IT THROUGH	J. J FARJEON
WANTED FOR MURDER	HENRY HOLT
DEATH LEAVES NO CARD	MILES BURTON
OVERTURE TO DEATH	NGAIO MARSH

MYSTERY NOVELS

DANGEROUS CURVES	PETER CHEYNEY
ETERNITY, HERE I COME	DAVID HUME
SECRET WEAPONS	J. M. WALSH
WRECKERS MUST BREATHE	HAMMOND INNES
CONQUEST TAKES ALL	BERKELEY GRAY
U-BOAT IN THE HEBRIDES	A. D. DIVINE
ROUGH PASSAGE	GAVIN DOUGLAS
SPIES ALONG THE SEVERN	STEPHEN MADDOCK
DON'T GET ME WRONG	PETER CHEYNEY
FIVE ACES	DAVID HUME
SPIES FROM THE SKIES	J. M. WALSH
MR. MORTIMER GETS THE JITTERS	BERKELEY GRAY